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20th BATTALION

(B.E.L. PIONEERS)

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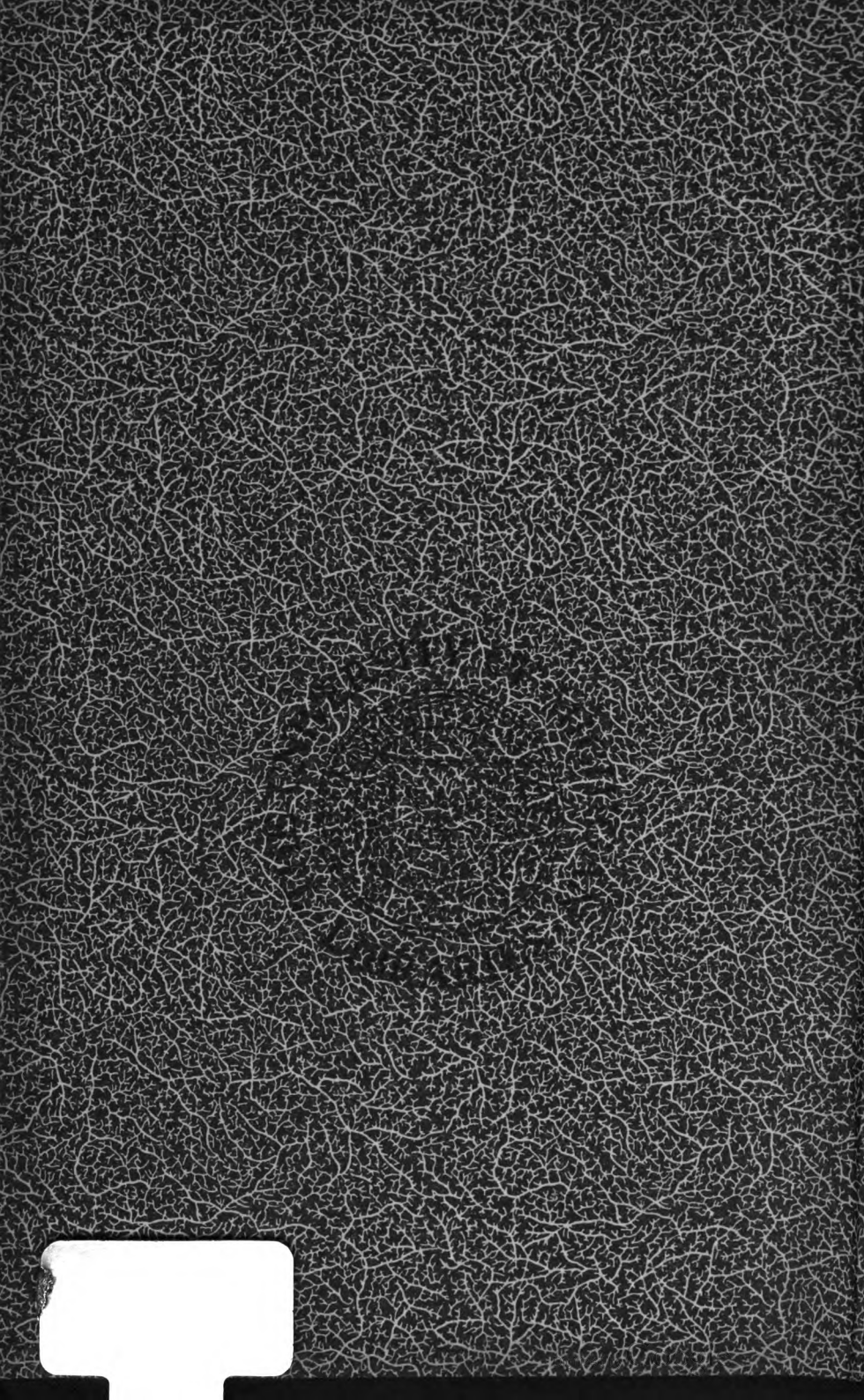

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A SHORT HISTORY

OF THE

20TH BATTALION
KING'S ROYAL RIFLE CORPS

(B.E.L. PIONEERS)

1915-1919

BY
CAPT. A. S. TURBERVILLE, M.C.

HULL:
GODDARD, WALKER & BROWN, LTD.
1923

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Inscribed to the Memory
of the
Officers, Warrant Officers, Non-Commissioned
Officers and Men
of the
20th King's Royal Rifle Corps
who fell
In the Cause of their Country and
the Service of the Battalion

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PREFACE

The compilation of this brief history was undertaken because it was felt that the few pages relating to the 20th Battalion, which were contributed to the different volumes of the King's Royal Rifle Corps Chronicle, were scarcely adequate as a permanent record of the unit, and that the suggestion that the doings of the Pioneer Battalion did not provide material for an interesting narrative was hardly fair to those who served in it. An endeavour has been made in the following pages to indicate the special interest and importance of pioneer work in relation to the operations of the great division to which the 20th for most of its career belonged. Pioneer units have had less than justice done to them, and it is, therefore only fitting that the invaluable activities of one of the distinctive arms of the service called forth by the peculiar needs of the Great War, should be explained. This account, therefore—which is probably the only one extant of the doings of any Pioneer Battalion—should have a general military interest.

But for those who served in " the 20th " the main interest is not of this impersonal nature—it is the warm, loyal and affectionate interest of its members in the unit in which they spent the hazardous days of a " great adventure," the greatest and most perilous in which any of them (let us profoundly hope) will ever be called upon to play a part. There are some who wish to forget those days of constant danger, anxiety and strain ; it is a more normal and a better thing to wish to remember and to recall with pride the achievements of our comrades of the Company, to which we belonged, the messmates who were our friends, the men whom it was an honour and a delight to lead and to serve.

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There are many difficulties to be overcome in compiling even so plain, concise and unvarnished a record as this. It is difficult to get the necessary materials, to secure accuracy, to include all the essentials, to omit what is merely ephemeral. There are bound to be many imperfections, but the attempt at least has been made to do justice, not only to the whole, but to each of its parts; not only to the battalion, but to every one of its companies. The sources of the narrative are (1) a copy of the Battalion War Diary, kindly lent by Colonel C. R. Martin; (2) personal diaries generously placed at the compiler's disposal by Colonel E. Murray, Captain A. H. Chambers, Lieut. H. H. Pickett; (3) for the larger operations, Sir D. Haig's Dispatches, a few copies of orders, etc., and the invaluable military maps; (4) personal knowledge extending over the period from the beginning of June, 1916, onward.

The compiler is also indebted for certain suggestions to several representative officers of the Battalion to whom the record was submitted when it was in manuscript.

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Chapter I.

TRAINING IN ENGLAND.

When the open operations on the Western Front, at the commencement of the Great War, subsided into protracted trench warfare, the rôle of the engineer became one of paramount importance. Indeed the task of creating, maintaining and developing elaborate field-works demanded an amount of constant labour for which the original composition of our Expeditionary Force made no sufficient provision. While the German engineers were organized in battalions, the British system supplied for front line work one field company for each infantry brigade, *i.e.*, three per division. It was to reinforce these field companies that Pioneer battalions were created; and eventually every division possessed one such battalion. The part to be played by these units was somewhat ambiguous. They were indeed a sort of mermaid, half engineers, half infantry. While their province was mainly to undertake the less highly technical and highly skilled work of field-engineering, they were also available for ordinary infantry duties, and at first, at all events, the precise use to be made of his pioneer battalion was left to the discretion of the individual divisional commander. Generally speaking, however, it may be said that during quiescent periods,

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while the division was simply line-holding, its pioneer battalion was employed in maintaining and strengthening the defences on the divisional front; that during active operations its task was the consolidation of the captured positions; that at all times it was a divisional reserve in case of emergency, and that there was a standing order that in event of a threatened enemy attack all other work at once ceased and the pioneers came under the orders of the nearest infantry unit for the manning of the line.

The 20th (Pioneer) Battalion, King's Royal Rifle Corps, owed its origin to the enterprise of the British Empire League, which undertook the raising of this unit at the request of the War Office, and Mr. Freeman Murray, Secretary of the League, threw himself into the work with great enthusiasm. At the very outset the unit had behind it the strength of an inherited tradition, the unsurpassed record of the regiment of which it at once became a part—the celebrated 60th. There can be no question that the very distinctive characteristics of the Rifles, in dress, in custom and in drill, were invaluable in fostering *esprit de corps*, and regimental consciousness. The Service Battalions gave back something to the parent stem and added a fresh lustre to an already glorious name. On September 10th, 1915, Lieutenant-Colonel Eric Murray (son of Mr. Freeman Murray) reported for duty as the Commanding Officer of the new unit, and on the same day the first recruit was obtained. Recruiting was at first very slow work. In the first fortnight only a dozen men were secured, and it was well

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on in October before the first hundred was reached. November was a much more successful month, for by the end of it nearly 800 men had been gathered together. The large majority of these came from the East End of London, particularly from Woolwich, where very keen recruiting work was done by one of the first of the battalion officers. Expeditions further afield produced very useful contingents from Durham and Somerset. Some of the finest and most loyal workers in the battalion were miners from Durham and other northern counties; but the 20th was at the beginning, and despite the drafting of all and sundry reinforcements to it in later days, it remained, essentially a battalion of Londoners. It would be impossible to exaggerate the value of its wealth of Cockney humour, light-hearted, racy and ironical, which found food for laughter and caustic comment in many an unhumorous situation and maintained the spirits and endurance of the men in times of fatigue and discomfort.

For the earliest drill parades the services of instructors from the rifle depôt at Winchester were available, but soon the battalion had instructors of its own. There was a leaven of the regular army, Captain J. Jenkins, the Adjutant, and the R.S.M. for example, being both ex-Grenadier Guardsmen. A considerable proportion of the original officers had seen previous active service, and a number of others, as befitted a pioneer battalion, were civil engineers, the Commanding Officer aiming at securing for each company at least two officers with engineering experience. By the end of the year

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21 officers had been obtained; but of them there were seldom more than a third available at any one time, the remainder being absent at some course of instruction or other. As Second-in-Command, Major C. Roswell Martin of the 17th Battalion was appointed; as Transport Officer, Second-Lieut. A. Strang, who had been in the Yeomanry during the South African War and after. By the end of January a battalion transport had been collected from Woolwich, viz., 6 g.s. waggons, 8 limbers, 4 field kitchens, 2 water carts and an officers' mess-cart.

The initial parades were held in the courtyard of Devonshire House by the courtesy of the Duke of Devonshire, President of the British Empire League, but as the battalion grew this came to be used only for "falling in" and the serious drills were carried out in the Green Park. Specifically pioneer training was done on ground handed over for the purpose rent-free by the G.W.R. and a series of trenches were constructed and revetted in accordance with plans originally issued to the G.W.R. civil engineers by the War Office for the London defences. Owing to shortage of rifles there was at first difficulty in providing the equally essential instruction in musketry and arms drill, the battalion being for some time without any rifles at all and considering itself well off when 60% of the men were supplied. A number of Officers and N.C.O.'s attended the School of Musketry at Hythe and by degrees in this way an efficient staff of musketry instructors was obtained.

By the middle of February the battalion was

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over 1,000 strong and Colonel Murray thereupon represented to the War Office the desirability of moving the unit out of London so as to have fuller and freer facilities for training. The reply of the War Office was to intimate that Lieut.-General Wooley Dodd would inspect the battalion on February 18th, 1916. The inspection duly took place in Hyde Park, the battalion and its transport being drawn up near the Marble Arch. General Wooley Dodd brought the surprising intelligence that he had been asked by the War Office to report as to whether the battalion was ready to go out to France. As its full complement in men had only just been obtained, and it had, therefore, as a fully constituted unit had no training whatever, this was expediting matters with a vengeance! The fact that it had as yet been impossible to obtain any adequate training, either in arms drill or musketry—for one thing no rifle range was available in the middle of London—was pointed out, and the General undertook to advise the War Office that the battalion should be moved to a training camp.

On February 22nd the order came that the battalion was to take up its quarters at Wellingborough. The journey took place three days later, the arrival being at dusk and in snow, which continued to fall on the following days, rendering the settling in of the battalion and its training, especially in pioneer work, distinctly difficult. There was also some trouble as regards rations, owing to the inexperience of the cooks, the battalion having been billeted with sustenance while in London, so that they had had no opportunity of acquiring skill in the

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economical use of army provender. The townspeople immediately laid themselves out to minister to the comforts of officers and men, and the number of letters addressed to Wellingborough from the battalion during its sojourn in France bore eloquent testimony to the number of friendships formed during the brief period spent in the town.

It was indeed brief, for only a week after the battalion's arrival, intimation was received from the War Office that the battalion was to regard itself as under orders for France. In these circumstances the instruction which followed a day or two later to hand in rifles was very surprising. What with the carrying out of this order, the badness of the weather and the necessary inoculation of the whole unit, the amount of training that was possible was exceedingly small. Nevertheless the battalion was warmly commended when it was inspected, as it happened, on one and the same day, by Field-Marshal Lord Grenfell, one of the most distinguished of living Riflemen, and General Bruncker, commanding the 23rd Reserve Infantry Brigade, to which the battalion was attached while at Wellingborough. The latter General made a second inspection on the eve of the battalion's departure for France which took place from Southampton on March 27th. That evening the 20th K.R.R.C. embarked on two troopships, 10 officers, 212 O.R. and transport on the *Rossetti*, 18 officers, 772 O.R. on the Liverpool and North Wales excursion steamer *La Marguerite*. The night was very tempestuous, with a violent blizzard. The larger vessel was content to remain in the Solent, but the *La Marguerite* attempted the passage. The

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seas were so violent, however, that she was considerably damaged and had to turn in mid-Channel. Her passengers were landed at Southampton and proceeded to a rest camp, heartily glad to be on *terra firma* once more. They had had their fill of terrors and discomfort ere ever France was even sighted. Eventually the battalion was conveyed safely to Havre, the *Rossetti* arriving early in the morning of the 30th, the Clyde Steamer *King Edward* with the larger contingent, about 24 hours later. The second, and all-important stage of the battalion's history had begun.

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Chapter II.

IN THE YPRES SALIENT.

(*Canal Bank—La Clytte*).

The 20th's introduction to active warfare was destined to be in what was at that time easily the most famous and the most unpleasant sector of the British front—the Ypres Salient, held by the Second Army, under General Plumer. Travelling via Rouen with the intense deliberation characteristic of French troop trains, the two contingents found themselves in due course at Poperinghe, and on April 2nd, without any preliminary introduction, work actually commenced. To begin with, the battalion was subject to a serious annoyance owing to the lack of rifles. It was not so much the obvious incongruity of a fighting unit marching up the great Poperinghe–Ypres Road and working in the forward area unarmed that caused natural surprise and dissatisfaction, but rather the imputation which speedily got abroad that the unit consisted of conscientious objectors. This rumour rankled profoundly and it was fortunate that the G.O.C. 20th Division, to which the battalion was at first attached, was able to arrange for the distribution of rifles throughout the companies within the first eight or nine days.

At this period the 20th Division was responsible for the extreme left sector on the British Front and

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held the line in the district where the opposing trenches crossed from west to east of the Yser Canal near Boesinghe. Part of the battalion's work was in the rear, part on the further side of the Canal. The work was varied and afforded at the very outset valuable experience in different branches of field engineering for the novitiate of a pioneer unit. For A. Company there was the drainage of a communication trench known as Skipton Road and the repairing of its parapets; for B. Company the drainage of some trenches lying 1,500 yards east of the Canal called The Willows; for C. Company work on a subterranean passage leading to a machine-gun emplacement near the Canal Bank, the construction of an observation post there, the provision of a working-party for a tramway running from Dawson's Corner to the line, and for the carrying of material for the wiring of the sector between Talana Farm and Tugela Farm. The system adopted for the distribution of tasks between the companies was, that as there were three areas of work, three companies should be employed at a time, leaving one in reserve to relieve the others in rotation. Thus each Company had one night's rest out of four.

The men learnt something of the difficult arts of trench drainage, of revetment with sandbags and expanded metal, of fitting trenches with U. frames, of laying trenchboards upon the U. frame bearers, of erecting barbed-wire entanglements and laying tramways. They learnt other arts no less necessary—how to do their job in darkness and in silence. Work in the forward area in the Ypres Salient was too completely under enemy observa-

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tion ever to be attempted in daylight and the trenches were not deep enough to provide adequate protection. But even under cover of darkness any unusual sound was likely to be noticed by the near and ever vigilant enemy, and personal safety as well as efficient work demanded that pick, shovel and hammer should be used with the minimum of noise. The battalion was lucky in having a comparatively easy breaking-in. They saw a good deal of shell fire and machine-gun fire, and the crossing of the Canal bridges and half hours unavoidably spent after the night's work at a railhead called Ypres Junction, were unpleasant experiences. Both places received persistent attention from the enemy, the first from his machine-guns, the latter from his artillery. Dawson's Corner also was apt to be severely "strafed" at times. There were few casualties—the first, a fatal one, being sustained on 'D' Company's first night of work, and there were none of those disintegrating avalanches of violence, which seemed to render all idea of pioneer work inconceivable, of which the battalion was to have its full share later on. And back in the wood which was the permanent quarters of the unit, in 'D' camp, sufficiently far removed from the enemy to be comfortable, there were opportunities for recreation. It was a notable occasion when the 20th K.R.R.C. met the 1st Grenadier Guards at football and overcame them.

Opportunity for recreation on a large scale and for the thorough infantry training, of which the battalion still stood so much in need, owing to the extreme brevity of the stay at Wellingborough,

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was early afforded. On April 15th the battalion came out, marching from 'D' camp to Poperinghe, after starting a good tradition by leaving its former quarters spotlessly clean to the great satisfaction of the Camp Commandant. On the 16th the men had their first experience since arrival in France of a fairly long march over the *pavé* roads typical of Belgium and Northern France in full kit, and found it somewhat trying.

They were well rewarded at the end of it, however, for the small Flemish village in which the three weeks of training were to be passed presented a most charming contrast to the squalor of the Salient; and in it were spent some of the most agreeable and also some of the most valuable days in the existence of the battalion. They were both happy and strenuous—happy because there were opportunities for social intercourse and amusement such as neither officers and men had had before—football matches, boxing, riding lessons for the Officers, under Major Martin's direction, *al fresco* concerts, etc.—and the kindest hospitality on the part of the villagers, who witnessed the departure of the battalion with genuine regret when it eventually had to march away. Never before had there been a decent chance for the unit to become knit together as a happy family. In England, owing to the exigencies of recruiting, of special training courses and so on, officers had seen little of each other or of their men. But, while the social aspect of the Winnezeele days was of first rate importance, the training was thoroughly hard and keen. Indeed as there was night work as well as day work,

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the daily programme was one of 23 hours—starting at 5 a.m. and finishing at 4 a.m.!

Much valuable pioneer training was carried out under the supervision of R.E. officers, directed by the 20th Division—the construction of fire and communication trenches, various kinds of revetment, and demolition, all being practised. Lord Cavan, then commanding the 14th Corps, to which the 20th Division at that time belonged, was particularly struck with the excellence of the engineering work accomplished. Unfortunately the provision of a full-length rifle range proved impossible, but under the superintendence of Major Martin a ruined house was cleverly adapted for use as a short 40 yards range, and here from 5 a.m. to 6 p.m. every day 'rapid' and 'grouping' practices were fired, so that at last the men were provided with the all-essential shooting experience they stood in need of. No less important was the ordinary drill from squad drill to battalion drill which, under the direction of the Adjutant produced a higher standard of discipline and an obvious improvement in the appearance and bearing of the men.

On May 9th the battalion once more made its way towards the line—to the same sector but under a different division, the 6th. A. and B. Companies' new quarters were in H. camp behind Boesinghe, while C. and D. Companies, under the command of Major Inglis, proceeded to Burgomaster Farm, east of Brielen. The two former Companies had time for drill and musketry and were employed in work, in or round their camp, which stood badly in need of repair. Their main task was road-making, the

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approaches to H. camp never having recovered from the winter rains and the road requiring a new foundation of pine logs. In this work the 20th acted in co-operation with the 11th D.L.I., Major Inglis' contingent worked further forward across the Canal, again repairing the Willows and Skipton road. Both at their work, especially in the vicinity of Burnt Farm, and at Burgomaster Farm, which was under constant enemy observation, these two Companies came under a good deal of hostile fire.

On May 18th the battalion once more marched away from the Brielen neighbourhood. Its permanent allocation had been decided upon. It had been selected as the pioneer battalion of the 3rd Division. To be incorporated in this superb division, whose illustrious history since its days under Wellington in the Peninsula had been eclipsed by its splendid record as an iron fighting division from the Battle of Mons onwards in the present war, was rightly looked upon as a conspicuous honour. It was to prove as exacting as it was conspicuous.

The battalion's new encampment was at the foot of Scherpenberg on the main road from Bailleul to Dickebusch, then a sylvan retreat, but destined to become the scene of fierce and most critical fighting in the Spring of 1918. Here the Commanding Officer first met Colonel Elliott, C.R.E., 3rd Division, who was to order the battalion's activities for many a long day and on many an important and dangerous exploit. The first job he gave the battalion was not very pleasant—the repair of the parapet of part of the front line in the valley between Vierstraat

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and Wytschaete—in close proximity to the enemy and under frequent attention from his trench-mortars.

Pleasanter quarters than the cramped accommodation at Scherpenberg and less objectionable work were forthcoming from May 23rd onwards—the battalion moving under canvas just west of the hamlet of La Clytte and being given work of considerable importance indeed, but at a comfortable distance from the enemy. The work consisted in the constructing of a rear defence system, running from Parrot Farm, slightly south-west of Vierstraat, to the eastern end of Ridge Wood. In this sector of the front our line was entirely dominated by the Germans on the Messines Ridge; a heavy attack was feared and the new trenches were needed in the event of a retirement being compelled. Besides trench digging, revetment, U-framing and drainage were as usual necessary, and as water was invariably found at 3 feet depth, sandbag breastworks had to be built to provide the necessary cover. Some shelling was to be looked for at various points on the Vierstraat Road, particularly at the village cross-roads, but on the work, bullets from the machine-guns and fixed rifles were the chief trouble.

Soon after the commencement of the battalion's work on the Vierstraat Switch the 3rd Division moved out of the line for training in the St. Omer neighbourhood, leaving the 20th attached to the 50th Division for the time being and Colonel Murray entirely responsible for the Switch system. Work on the Switch itself was later on supplemented by the construction of a new trench running from the

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front line system back to the Switch. This trench had also to be supplied with a thorough wire entanglement. The disadvantage of the wiring job, which was entrusted to 2nd Lieut. K. Griffits, who had already made a reputation as a wiring expert, was that in the day the Germans would spot the new wire and were always likely to turn a machine-gun after dark onto the workers.

Our days at La Clytte were in the main very pleasant days, despite the risk from bullets and the long marches every night to and from the scene of the men's labours. The country was green, undulating and pretty. There was none of the dreary repulsiveness of the swamped area directly east of Ypres. Fairly frequent visits were possible to the attractive cafés, canteens and cinemas of Bailleul, which in 1916, despite the proximity of the front, still retained much of its old-world smiling charm. The La Clytte period would always be looked back upon as one of the battalion's most unclouded memories. Experiences of a tragically different character were in store for it in the immediate future.

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Chapter III.

THE BATTLE OF THE SOMME.

Carnoy—the Citadel.

From the beginning of June there had been rumours and presages of big happenings to take place in the near future, and during the last few days of the month there were sharp bombardments of the enemy's front and considerable aerial activity, which betokened that the quiescence of winter and spring was near its end. Altogether it was in no way surprising to receive orders on June 30th to prepare for departure to an unknown destination. Next day came news of the initial stage of the "great push," and when on the morning of July 3rd we marched out of La Clytte, bound as we knew for the neighbourhood of Amiens, it was realized that we were rejoining the 3rd Division in order to take a part in the battle of the Somme.

The transport moved off on its own; the remainder of the battalion entrained at Bailleul, and enjoyed a pleasant, and (for a troop train) a remarkably speedy journey via Calais and Abbeville, thence through the charmingly wooded hilly country along the Somme valley by Flixecourt and Canaples to our detraining station, Fienvillers-Candas. Next day in very hot steamy weather we marched to Vignacourt, made arrangements to billet there for the night, and then got orders to move on to Villers-

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Bocage, which we reached before dark. The men had found it heavy going in the oppressive heat of the morning, but on the second stage came along in grand style. From occasional wounded soldiers, from copies of the Paris Daily Mail, sold to us by urchins on our way, we learnt particulars of the recent fighting. At Villers-Bocage the battalion became divided, orders being received for 500 men to be sent forward at once. Accordingly in the afternoon of the 5th, a detachment consisting of A. and B. Companies with two platoons of C. and part of the transport, under the command of Major Martin, left in motor lorries for Bray. The remainder of the battalion continued its march, proceeding henceforward by night and resting by day. The first stop was at the village of Franvillers, the second after a rather long and trying march at Morlancourt, where a halt was made until the 8th. After a most trying midnight march over muddy roads, mostly at crawling pace, owing to frightful traffic congestion, in the early dawn of the 9th, the final destination was reached, the so-called Storm Dugouts near the ruined hamlet of Carnoy. Here were tracks of deep oozing Somme mud, the roar of many batteries, and just a little distance away the first German line of trenches which the British infantry had carried on July 1st.

Major Martin's contingent had already learnt something of what Somme fighting meant. Dumped unceremoniously in the open before Carnoy, they had made themselves as comfortable as possible in bivvies there. The general situation on the battle front on the date of their arrival was that the British,

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having taken Fricourt and Mametz, held the old German line running in a north-easterly direction from Pommier Redoubt in front of the village of Montauban into Bernafay Wood. This trench, known as Montauban Alley, ran just in front of the crest of a ridge. Opposite rose a higher ridge, the present German position, on which were Mametz and Delville Woods and the villages of Contalmaison, Bazentin-le-Grand and Longueval. The intervening valley had not as yet been completely secured. A copse there, called Caterpillar Wood, was disputed territory. Running at right angles from Montauban Alley, into this wood ran East Trench. In the nature of the case this was no health resort. Major Martin's men had to drain the trench and render it passable for the infantry moving up to Caterpillar Wood. In addition to this they had to bridge the large number of captured trenches running between Carnoy and Montauban, and to make an efficient roadway between those villages for the large traffic which the military situation required. The last was a formidable undertaking, as the existing track, which ran through cuttings, was much too narrow and needed metalling throughout. These tasks involved a number of fatal casualties from shell fire and from snipers.

When the remainder of the battalion arrived they reinforced their predecessors in their work, and were also employed in the somewhat venturesome task of making forward dumps of R.E. materials in No Man's Land at various points in front of the front line in the valley between the Montauban and Mametz ridges, now thinly occupied at night

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by British patrols. This was in preparation for the second great attack which was timed for July 14th.

Unhappily ere that the battalion sustained its first loss in officers in a reconnoitring expedition on July 12th in preparation for the approaching battle. Captain Hole was badly hit, Lieut. Naish killed outright, and Sec.-Lieut. Perry mortally wounded. This was a heavy loss, as Capt. Hole was one of the most experienced soldiers in the battalion, and the subalterns two of its most expert professional engineers. All three in very different ways had been most popular.

Two duties were allotted to the 20th for July 14th—the consolidation of the village of Bazentin-le-Grand, and the construction of a strong point near a windmill just west of Longueval. The first was allotted to B. Company, now commanded by Captain Avila, who had had long and valuable previous experience of the Western Front, reinforced with two platoons of A.; the second to D. Company, under Major Inglis. These two parties moved up to advanced positions on the night of the 13th-14th, while C. Company, the remaining platoons of A. and Headquarters, stayed behind in the meantime in the Carnoy bivvies.

On the capture of Bazentin, and before it had been effectually cleared of the enemy, B. Company were ordered forward to consolidate. The order was undoubtedly premature, and was as a matter of fact almost immediately countermanded, but not in time to prevent one platoon, under Sec.-Lieut. C. Langridge entering the village. They were at

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once fired upon by snipers and suffered several casualties. The situation looked rather ugly, with parties of the enemy obviously in rear as well as in front, and the remainder of the Company did not put in an appearance. Sec.-Lieut. Langridge decided to commence digging at once in the low ground east of the village. Here his men were troubled by machine-gun fire, and soon after by heavy shelling, until they were withdrawn by Capt. Avila, who had come in search of the missing platoon, accompanied by Lieut. Harvey. The latter, while looking after the wounded men, was himself killed. Here was another heavy loss; for Harvey was not only a very efficient engineer, but also one of the most lovable of men.

Further west, D. Company had been able to make better progress. In their case the error of sending the pioneers forward too early to be able to get anything done was not committed, and although they had casualties in going forward, including Sec.-Lieuts. Bennet and Pethick, both badly wounded, the conditions were not too bad for work, and the commencement was made of a very efficient job on the strong points, in spite of bad casualties from heavy machine-gun fire, the work being facilitated by the admirable dispositions of Major Inglis, whose operation orders on this, as on all subsequent occasions, were a model of clearness and forethought.

After breakfast the battalion reserve had moved up to Montauban Alley, and in the afternoon after some trouble due to a heavy barrage on the road leading to Bazentin, it relieved B. Company in the

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village, the two platoons of A. Company working with the 56th Co., R.E. on the fortifications of the Village keep, and C. Company starting upon four strong points in front of the village, one per platoon. The A. Company contingent under the command of Captain Joyce, one of those very game fellows, who joined the forces though well over military age, came in for a very nasty time, as Bazentin was twice, during the summer night, heavily bombarded with 5.9's. It cost the Battalion the life of yet another officer, one of its youngest and most attractive, 2nd Lieut. Garlick.

C. Company, though intermittently worried by shelling and machine-guns, were less seriously troubled, and working uninterruptedly for 12 hours, not only dug the four posts required, but linked them up with one another, so that Bazentin was provided with a continuous defensive line. This big piece of work was done under the direction of Capt. B. D. Melville, to whom great credit was due for its success.

During the next few days, A., B. and C. Companies, working in rotation, continued to elaborate the Bazentin defences, bringing the new system round the flanks of the village and wiring the trenches which had been dug; while D. Company did similar work on their strong point, digging C.T.'s out to the newly captured positions. Heavy shelling on the 18th due to a German counter-attack greatly interfered with the work, and caused casualties in D. Company's trenches. Resting platoons were employed, as before the battle, on the Montauban Road.

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On July 20th there came a complete change of work, the attention of the whole battalion being henceforward centred on the very evil area round Longueval, Delville Wood, Waterlot Farm and Trônes Wood. On that morning, B. and C. Companies had orders to proceed to Delville Wood, the capture of which was intended, and to construct strong points along its outer fringes. The Companies after traversing a ghastly lane, which was a veritable slaughter-house, arrived in Longueval only to find that, not only the greater part of Delville Wood, but also the northern end of the village itself, were still in German hands. Between July 19th-21st, D. Company was engaged each night under heavy fire on a fire trench, running across the Montauban-Longueval Road. On the night July 21st-22nd A. Company, now ably commanded by Captain Banks, were occupied in digging under heavy fire a trench running from the south of Longueval to the northern extremity of Trônes Wood. The following night, while A. and B. Companies were digging under constant shell-fire in the south of Longueval, prepared to consolidate positions in Delville Wood in anticipation of their capture, which again did not take place, C. Company had a very trying experience. While traversing a particularly evil communication trench which led from Bernafay Wood viâ Trônes Wood to our front line between Delville Wood and Waterlot Farm, they were caught in a very violent barrage and lost a number of men, including their Company Sergeant-Major, who was killed, and Sec.-Lieut. Wilcox, who was very seriously wounded. The remainder suc-

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ceeded in reaching their objective, and in doing good work, despite frightful conditions, and the awful difficulties of the carrying parties in the communication trench, on a new trench, joining together our front line with the southern boundary of Delville Wood. On the night of July 23rd digging and wiring work was continued on the same trench by A. and C. Companies, while B. was engaged at Waterlot Farm and D. on their trench astride the Montauban-Longueval Road. Conditions were, as usual, bad.

They were a good deal worse the following night. A party from B. and D. Companies bound for Waterlot Farm, and one from C. and D. Companies, whose job was to wire a trench behind Longueval, had reached Montauban Alley when the enemy commenced a bombardment of exceptional intensity, gas shells being mixed with H.E. and shrapnel, preparatory to a powerful counter-attack on our positions in High Wood and Longueval. The whole line was in uproar, the din being increased by the explosion of dumps of heavy ammunition which had been set on fire, and the valley and opposite ridge were enveloped in smoke and flame. For the time being it was impossible to proceed, but after a while the shelling somewhat subsided, and the parties made their way forward, both reaching their destination, C. Company getting its work done despite the continuance of shell-fire and a number of casualties, which, being sustained when the men were carrying the wiring material from the dump to the scene of work, threw the organisation of the working party into confusion. The party at Waterlot Farm were unable to do any work, as they had to "stand to"

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in anticipation of an attack. After this terrible night it was a great relief to be greeted on return to camp with the news that the Division was forthwith going into Corps reserve.

In the afternoon of the 25th the Battalion, minus 9 officers and some 200 men out of those who had arrived at Carnoy a fortnight before, marched away from the thunder of the guns and billeted in Morlancourt that evening. The next few days were spent in light training and very popular bathing parades in the charming leafy valley of the little river Ancre. On the 30th under a tropical sun we shifted our quarters from Morlancourt to the village of Treux, where we lived under canvas in a fine camping ground under the shade of great trees and with small streams on three sides of us. Within a few minutes of our settling in, half the men were disporting themselves in the water. Our days at Treux were passed in P.T. wiring practice, route marching, night operations, and a good deal of recreation. That restful time in superb weather, much too hot to fight in, but very delightful to rest in, did everybody an immense amount of good, but passed only too quickly. C. and D. Companies were lucky, for they were able to remain at Treux when the right-half battalion were needed forward. On August 5th under orders from the Corps, A. and B. Companies marched out in the afternoon and shortly after 8 p.m. reached their new camping ground in bare open country near the Citadel (so-called) behind Mametz, and not far from the Bray-Fricourt road. The left-half battalion followed on the 11th.

The new encampment was further west than

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Carnoy; on the other hand the part of the line now held by the 3rd Division was further east than it had been in July. The camp was beset by an abominable plague of flies, which were not merely a nuisance but also very unhealthy, and nearly everybody suffered from an unpleasant malady in consequence. The result of the push in a northerly direction between Fricourt and Trônes Wood had been to create a sharply defined rectangular salient. When the battalion had been in the line before, it had been apparent to the merest tyro that a very vulnerable flank had been created. The artillery fire that troubled us most came from the strong German positions to the east in Guillemont and Ginchy, and generally from the enemy lines in front of Combles. The sharpness of the angle in the neighbourhood of Waterlot Farm, where the line from running roughly east and west started to run north and south, meant that the German guns took many of our positions in the rear. It was obviously imperative that the salient should be flattened out, and for that purpose that Guillemont and Ginchy should be captured. Inasmuch as these strongholds were very difficult to take and were invaluable to the enemy, it should have been perfectly clear that a big concerted movement with considerable forces was necessary for success. But that which seemed transparently obvious to troops on the spot it took a long time for the Higher Command to recognise, and battalions were allotted tasks too heavy for divisions. In these futile and costly operations, doomed in the nature of the case to failure, the 3rd Division was sacrificed, and its pioneers were

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repeatedly brought forward into most obnoxious assembly positions in order to consolidate enemy lines which were not captured.

The battalion's second experience of the Somme battle was briefer, less costly and less harassing than the first—only one officer fell, a very earnest and conscientious man, Nainby—but the experience was bad enough in all conscience. The first task allotted to the Pioneers, which A. and B. Companies commenced alone, and which C. and D. Companies joined in afterwards, was not too unpleasant. It consisted in thickly wiring a strong defensive line from the east of Montauban over towards the south-western corner of Bernafay Wood, and then bending back to Bricqueterie on the Maricourt Road, and thence in an easterly direction to a point south-west of Maltzhorn Farm. Four fences were erected, and in front of these triangular wire entanglements. In those days Montauban had become a quiet enough spot, but the Bricqueterie, surrounded as it was by our batteries, was a most disagreeable place to have to linger near. On the afternoon of August 8th conditions were very bad; it was difficult to get material through to the working parties, and it was only owing to the skilful handling of the situation by the officers present that many casualties were avoided.

The extensive wiring job successfully completed, the battalion was next occupied in work which was new to it, but of which it was to have much experience in the future, *viz.*: the excavation of deep mined dug-outs on the German pattern. For this purpose, parties working in six-hours' shifts, were

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attached to the 56th Field Company and the East Riding Field Company, R.E. of the 3rd Division, and to the 183rd Tunnelling Company. A composite party of three platoons took up its quarters with the last mentioned unit for a few days in Mansel Copse. The dug-outs were situated at various points in the trench-system between Maltzhorn Farm and Faviere Wood. Although the approaches along the Bricqueterie Road and the trenches themselves were none too healthy, the nature of the work there insured a very fair amount of protection. This occupation did not last long, being interrupted by preparations for an attack by the 9th and 76th Brigades. The Pioneers were ordered to place two parties of 160 and 80 men respectively at the disposal of the two brigades; the remainder of the battalion were to remain in reserve, ready to move at 15 minutes' notice. The Division was to make good a line running from Arrow Head Copse to Angle Wood near Maurepas, and the Pioneers were to consolidate it with strong points. Nothing came of this enterprise. Various jobs for the strengthening of the Maltzhorn trench system were, however, carried through by the party attached to the 76th Brigade, in spite of heavy machine-gun and rifle fire. Similarly the 9th Brigade's party put in over nine hours continuous work in widening a narrow trench in that area, making it fit for double traffic and therefore facilitating the work of infantry reliefs. The final enterprise undertaken by the battalion at this period was carried out by a mixed detachment of 235 men and six officers drawn from all four Companies, under the command of Major

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Inglis. Only a few hours before the Division was due to be relieved, the 76th Brigade had captured a German trench, south of Guillemont, known as Lonely Trench. At midnight the detachment was sent out to link up this trench with the front line by means of a C.T. It was a most disagreeable undertaking, as it was executed under a heavy and constant shell fire, which in an ordinary sector of the front would have been regarded as rendering the carrying out of such work in the open quite out of the question.

On the morning of August 21st, the battalion took farewell of the Citadel Camp, and set out once more *en route* for Morlancourt. General Rawlinson said he greatly regretted the departure of the 3rd Division from the Fourth Army. That regret was not shared by us. We hoped we had taken leave of the Somme battle for good this time; but the hope was destined to be disappointed.

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Chapter IV.

THE BATTLE OF THE ANCRE.

(Loos—Opposite Serre).

After a couple of days at Morlancourt we marched into Mericourt and there entrained for a brief railway journey, which landed us back at Fienvillers-Candas at nine in the evening. We then found ourselves embarked upon a wearisome march of nearly five hours' duration, arriving at our destination, the village of Heuzecourt, at 2 a.m. Heuzecourt was such a peaceful, beautiful little spot in the midst of radiant cornfields, so refreshing a contrast from the barrenness of the Citadel, that we hoped it might prove to be our quarters for a period of training out of the line. But there was no intention of giving us a rest. We were moved ruthlessly on the next day to Frohen-le-Grand, the day after to Flammermont and on the 27th to Monchy-Cayeux. So far our march had been through quietly pretty country; but the next stage northward to Marest brought us to the outskirts of a black colliery district. The following day we penetrated into it, reaching our resting place for the night, Houchin, in a prodigious tropical downfall, which converted our camp into a quagmire, ourselves into drowned rats. On the 31st proceeding viâ Noeux-les-Mines and Mazingarbe, we reached that cluster of red-brick houses on the main Béthune—Lens road known

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as Philosophe, and were there billeted. Subsequently, however, a move was made back into Mazingarbe, where we had most comfortable and civilised quarters. The First Army area, into which the Division had now been brought, was in every way a remarkable contrast to that from which it had come. It was a quiet front, and for that reason the elaborate precautions which the authorities enforced for the avoidance of shell-fire seemed provokingly excessive. The chief heritage of the Battle of Loos was the immense interminable length of the C.T.'s commencing at Philosophe and running out towards the village of Loos. But in daylight these trenches had to be entered at their commencement with great circumspection in small parties following each other at intervals, under the vigilant eye of a military policeman, and followed throughout their weary and tortuous entirety. Yet so safe was this Philosophe end of the trench system that little French gamins ran up them selling newspapers and chocolates. It was an ugly enough country with its rows of red brick colliers' cottages, its pit heads, mine shafts and huge slag heaps; yet the presence of real inhabited dwellings, shops and civilians, would have been welcome even to the most solitary recluse after the Somme. There were very welcome opportunities of recreation and freedom from the sense of strain and responsibility due to participation in a big battle. It was while we were at Mazingarbe that there were published the decorations won in the Battle of the Somme, the first awards gained by the battalion. The Military Cross was gained by Captain Jenkins and

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Captain Melville, the D.C.M. by Company-Sergeant-Major Pratt, the Military Medal by Sergeant Phillips, Corporal Marks, Riflemen A. Woolston, C. Stone and G. Freshwater.

The battalion put in a great deal of important work during its short stay in the Loos-Hulloch sector, mainly mining. A small party under the presiding genius of Sec.-Lieut. J. Gabel, who had just come from England, and who was to stamp his mark so indelibly on the battalion's record, was attached to Lieut. Van Nesse (who now went definitely on to light railway work and so eventually drifted away from the battalion) for the maintenance of the extension system of trench tramways in this area. A section of B. Company, working with the Cheshire R.E.'s, was engaged upon the construction of trench mortar emplacements, but the rest of the troops were all occupied in mining operations. The most responsible task was allotted to A. Company, who, attached to the 253rd Tunnelling Company, worked on five listening saps running out from our front line towards the enemy. Mining operations of this nature are always rather nervous work in the nature of the case; moreover, the men employed in these shafts had to contend against the trouble of bad and noxious air. The Commanding Officer singled out for special praise the three A. Company officers responsible for this work, viz.: Captain Banks, Lieut. Chambers and Sec.-Lieut. Thomas, the last a professional mining engineer, whose experience was invaluable.

B. Company troops not engaged upon the trench mortar emplacements were detailed to work

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with the East Riding R.E.'s on the construction of deep dug-outs in the front line; C. and D. Companies did similar work with the 56th Field Company, R.E., in the reserve line. Owing to the distance of the trenches from Mazingarbe and the nature of the work, in shifts, it was not possible for most of the troops to operate directly from their billets. The system carried out, for example, by C. and D. Companies was for the men to take up their quarters in the trenches for a stretch of 48 hours, which meant three eight-hours' shifts at work and three breaks. As one company relieved the other, this gave each, allowing for long marches backwards and forwards, about 40 hours "off" behind in Mazingarbe. As quarters in the trench area shelters were constructed near Crucifix Dump in Loos and in Gun Trench. These were well enough in fair weather but in some exceedingly heavy rain, which fortunately did not come until the end of our time at Loos, the Gun Trench habitation was entirely washed out. The trenches, normally in good condition, became abominable. All things considered, however, there was not much to complain of in these days. The front was accurately termed a quiet one, but like all quiet fronts, it had its noisy periods, and trench-mortar activity in the forward area could be unpleasant, while the men working in the open on the tramways had to reckon with the usual machine-gun and rifle practice at night; but really the worst feature of the Loos trenches was the plague of innumerable rats of the largest and grossest description.

There was much talk of our spending the whole

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winter peacefully round about Mazingarbe, but the days when a fighting division could be left to spend a winter in peace had gone, if indeed they had ever existed, and from the first Colonel Murray had little expectation of a prolonged stay in this neighbourhood. On September 20th orders came for a new move, and on the 23rd the battalion formed up and marched away. As usual when a move took place the wildest rumours as to our destination were afloat. On this occasion the troops had managed to persuade themselves that they were bound for Salonika. As a matter of fact our journey was of the briefest. After a night's stay in Burbure, long remembered for the exceptional excellence of its billets for both officers and men, we moved viâ Estrée Blanche into a training area in the neighbourhood of the town of Aire and Lillers. Our own stopping place was Enguinegatte at which, and at the adjacent village of Therouanne, Henry VIII had won barren victories for England just four centuries ago. Under the shade of giant trees with its barns of pink, white and blue, the little village looked picturesque, but there was insufficiency of accommodation ; the interior of the farmyards was squalid and filthy, and their odours singularly offensive. The circumnavigation of the middens on a dark night was a perilous adventure not invariably accomplished with success, and the penalty of a false step was most objectionable. In the next few days both infantry and pioneer training were rigorously carried out in a fine, extensive training ground. This was to culminate in a practice attack by the whole Division. Owing to bad weather this was

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at first postponed, and then, when it took place, all that happened so far as the 20th were concerned, was that they marched in the wet sodden roads to the rendezvous, where they waited about doing nothing, except that at the end of the day they had a fine view from seats in the gallery, so to speak, of a very effective demonstration Stokes-gun barrage.

On the following day, October 5th, the battalion said 'good-bye' to Enguinegatte, the transport going separately, and a party from A. Company of 150 men with four officers proceeding by motor 'bus direct to the new area, where they were to report to the headquarters of the 5th Corps. The remainder of the battalion spent a couple of days in Monchy-Cayeux, and then made a comparatively short evening march into St. Pol. An immediate entrainment that night was anticipated. Instead it was found that there was no prospect of leaving till 7 a.m. next morning at the earliest. The men were therefore housed in a station shelter and the officers spent the night with as much comfort as possible on the floor of the Officers' Club. Next morning the train got away promptly enough and tripped merrily through to Doullens. Just beyond that station it stopped dead for no less than five and a half hours; after which it proceeded with the utmost deliberation, viâ Candas, to Acheux, which was reached at 8.15 p.m. A journey of some 40 miles had taken 13 hours!

After an unrestful night, followed by a most wearisome journey, billets would have been welcome, but there were no billets. No orders had been received at the time of detrainment. Pending their

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arrival, the cookers being fortunately available, a meal was provided for the troops by the wayside. At 10.20 orders came in that the battalion was to camp with a battalion of D.C.L.I. Pioneers near Beaussart. On arrival at the D.C.L.I.'s camp, which was reached about 1.30 a.m., it was found that there was absolutely no accommodation. There was no choice, therefore, but to settle down and sleep in the open. There was some pretty bad bungling in the staff work for that divisional move for which the Division itself was not responsible. At any rate one of the Brigadiers had nowhere to lay his head that night; so we suffered in august company!

The following night the battalion was able to bivouac properly on the same ground; but on the 10th quarters were shifted into the neighbouring village of Mailly-Maillet—a deserted village, because it was only a couple of miles from the line; but it afforded very fair billets.

The area into which the Division had now come was that of General Gough's Fifth Army. Quiet at the moment, it had been the scene of terrible and disastrous fighting in the previous July. Although at the time we knew nothing of it, the original Somme 'push' launched on July 1st had extended a long way north of La Boisselle and Ovillers up to Gommecourt, but from Thiepval to Gommecourt the attack had failed with appalling loss, so much so that it had not been persisted in. It was recognised at once that the German positions at Gommecourt itself, at Serre and at Beaumont Hamel were of quite exceptional strength; the sharply rising

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slopes in front of the hamlet of Serre making that perhaps the most formidable position of all. But since July the northward thrust from Thiepval to Combles had been making great progress, particularly between September 15th and 26th, and as the result of the capture of Thiepval itself the German lines round St. Pierre Divion, Beaumont Hamel and Serre had been converted into a very sharp angle, which invited attack from both sides. It was, then, the intention of the Higher Command that autumn once more to attack these strongholds, and the 3rd Division had been allotted the task of taking Serre.

Consequently, the work of the Pioneers was from the outset, in the main, definite preparation for an offensive. The original allocation of work was as follows. D. Company provided the small party for the congenial task of looking after the R.E. Dump at Beaussart, another for the trench tramways, a third for the construction of Divisional and Reserve Brigade dug-outs. A. Company, with half of B., worked with the East Riding R.E.'s on the construction of Brigade battle headquarters for the northern sector; C. Company with the other half of B. worked with the Cheshires on similar battle headquarters for the brigade in the southern sector. Thus, dug-out construction was once more the principal concern of the battalion. In addition to this, parties from A. and B. Companies worked on the improvement of some of the trenches, deepening and draining them and laying trenchboards. These were Northern and Southern Avenues, Sackville Street, Monk and Hittite. On the 15th A.

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Company were taken off the dug-out work altogether and put on trench maintenance only. B. Company did similar work on two of the main C.T.'s—Central and Railway Avenues, and also on Legend Trench. In the latter part of October several changes took place. First of all, the battalion once more shifted its quarters—this time from Mailly-Maillet back into the neighbourhood where the D.C.L.I. had been. The new camp could only be designated by its map reference, P.6. Central. In the second place, Major Martin, fine horseman as he was, met with a serious riding accident, as the result of which he had to go to hospital and was absent from the battalion for a year. Thirdly, on the 23rd, Colonel Murray was severely wounded in the arm, while inspecting the work in Southern Avenue. Thus to its great regret the 20th lost its original commander, who in the difficult initial months of breaking in a new unit for active service had shewn outstanding courage and had endeared himself to all. To the regret of the whole battalion the wound proved too severe to permit Colonel Murray to resume active service. He and Colonel Martin were old Tonbridgians, though they were not at school together, Colonel Martin being some years the senior. While Colonel Murray was training the 17th K.R.R.C. (B.E.L.), as second-in-command, Colonel Martin, who was then Captain in command of a Company, remarked upon the wonderful influence the former had over his men. On the formation of the 20th, Martin was transferred as Major and Second-in-Command. Jenkins, who was Quartermaster of the 17th also followed Colonel Murray to the 20th as Captain and Adjutant, in

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which capacity his great knowledge of military routine and discipline was invaluable. Indeed it is not too much to say that the success of the 20th was largely due to the personality of these three remarkable men.

It may well be recorded here that when the battalion were first sent across the English Channel Colonel Vaughan, who was responsible under General Belfield, for organising what was popularly known as Kitchener's Army, told Mr. Freeman Murray that the 20th K.R.R.C. was considered the smartest locally raised Pioneer battalion in the British Army. That it maintained this reputation is the proud belief of every member of the battalion and is exemplified by its record with the 3rd Division.

The command now devolved upon Major Inglis. He was able to build upon a foundation which had been well and truly laid, but he did an immense amount of good to the battalion, beyond question. He had a real flair for organisation, and possessed the gift of insight into the characters of his officers and men, so that he knew what they were fitted for, individually as well as collectively. When he was joined in the Orderly Room by Lieut. Furnell—another born organiser—these two men formed a combination of remarkable efficiency. Personal friends, they understood one another thoroughly, and worked in the closest agreement. There were curses and execrations from company-commanders at the quantities of paper that came in an unending stream from Orderly Room, but the papers represented hard work and hard thinking and a zealous care for detail. Another outstanding

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change in the personnel of the battalion which had taken place shortly before was the departure for England of C. Company's redoutable and very popular O.C.—Captain Melville, who was succeeded by Captain Newman. The latter had joined us at Houchin together with two other officers of the Monmouth Regiment, and had been acting as second-in-command of D. Company.

When Colonel Inglis took over the command, the attack on Serre was anticipated any day and the operations for the battalion in the event of its capture were known. It had been decided that B. and C. Companies should be entrusted with the consolidation of Serre itself, while the other two companies were employed upon the digging of C.T.'s to connect up our present front line with the present German front line. Except in the event of a thoroughly decisive enemy defeat, neither job was attractive. But the operations kept on being postponed; for the weather, which had been excellent in the early days of October, broke hopelessly. Torrential rains descended day after day, and the trenches became quagmires. The front line simply could not be used; the trenches were in places literally waist-deep in mud. Gum-boots, thigh, became a familiar article of equipment, but cases were known where the wearers had literally to be pulled out of these, so fast did they become embedded in the mire. In these circumstances, the entire energies of the Pioneers were directed to the task of keeping in some sort of condition the four main avenues of trench traffic, Northern, Central, Southern and Railway Avenues. As fast as the work of

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reconstruction was accomplished, the rains (more potent far than any shells in demolishing trenches) swept it away again. But had it not been for the persistent efforts of the Pioneers, there would have been no communication trenches left at all. Behind the trenches, the roads from Colincamps forward to Vauchelles in the rear of the divisional area soon got into a deplorable condition, the ever increasing traffic churning up the metalling and turning them also into quagmires. The battalion had to supply an officer, temporarily attached to Divisional Headquarters, to take charge of all roads in the divisional area, and infantry ranging from 200 in number on one day to 2,000 on another were put under his orders for their maintenance and drainage.

As the weather conditions became worse, so did the line liven up. At first it had been quiet enough, and so long as one avoided the Sucrerie on the road from Mailly-Maillet to Euston dump, one had felt fairly safe. But more and more troops poured into the district, and more and more batteries, which took to firing frequent bombardments, whose sole object seemed to be, in the candid fashion of those days, to announce to the enemy, "We intend to push here." Retaliation was an inevitable consequence, and the companies had some unpleasant experiences at their jobs. A very exacting piece of work was successfully accomplished on the night of November 9th–10th, when A., B. and C. wired the entire length of the divisional front with 100 yard stretches of wire and 50 yard gaps. This big undertaking, carried out under severe trench-mortar fire on the exposed ground in front of Rob Roy,

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our front line, was a notable achievement. The intention, obviously, was to persuade the enemy that we were set upon defending our own line and that nothing was farther from our thoughts than the idea of attacking his. Whether this very innocent piece of guile succeeded in its object may well be doubted.

The long postponed attack came off on November 13th, and is generally known as the Battle of the Ancre. Ere this, the battalion had once more shifted its quarters, this time taking up residence in the extremely squalid village of Courcelles-au-Bois. On the evening of November 12th, B. Company took up an assembly position in the cellars under La Signy Farm. While the attack was a success further south and Beaumont Hamel, St. Pierre Divion and Beaucourt-sur-Ancre were taken, the attempt upon Serre once again failed. Troops of the Division indeed penetrated into the village in the morning, but owing to the frightful condition of No Man's Land the attack as a whole failed and the afternoon saw the Division back in its own front line. The 31st Division on our left succeeded in making good the enemy's front line on a short front, and the scheme of connecting up this captured trench with Rob Roy at one time occurred to the staff, and B. Company was sent forward to carry ir out. A tremendous bombardment was being carried on by both sides at the time, and it is probable that had the attempt been made, the trench would never have been completed, and B. Company would incidentally have been annihilated. Fortunately the order was countermanded. Meanwhile the re-

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mainder of the battalion stayed in Courcelles waiting for orders to move up, which never came, while the Germans pitched high explosives shell round about the billets in the search for our 9.2 howitzer batteries in the village. The record of the battalion on the 13th was not absolutely nil, for the tramway contingent under Lieut. Penna, working completely exposed in the open, kept the lines in working order, repairing them where they were blown up by the shell-fire with great rapidity, and so greatly facilitating the rapid removal of the many wounded from the front line to the dressing-stations, for which purpose the tramways were utilised.

The next morning, the whole battalion, together with the field companies (R.E.), was put upon the task of clearing up and repairing the whole trench area from the results of its heavy battering during the previous twenty-four hours. The lengthy line of troops making its way towards Euston dump was spotted by the enemy, and caught by his shell-fire; but the long arduous day spent in the C.T.'s and Rob Roy was not as unpleasant or as costly in casualties as it had given promise of being. For the following week or so, the battalion's energies continued to be concentrated on the clearing and revetting of the C.T.'s and of Monk or Brown Trenches; and then in the night, November 25th–26th, there commenced a very notable enterprise in the history of the 20th—the wiring of the so-called Yellow Line. Authority had decided that in this sector a strong defensive front was to be established for the winter, and for this purpose a line slightly in rear of the most forward trenches was to be heavily wired. While, then,

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B. Company continued the maintenance of the C.T.'s, D. was occupied in the R.E. dump, the tramway and the building of a new Corps school of instruction at Vauchelles, A. and C. Companies were deputed to erect the very elaborate entanglements required for the Yellow Line. This undertaking, which continued night by night until December 16th, was the most notable so far in the battalion's history. It was a complete success, and won golden opinions, not only from the G.O.C., General Deverell, but from the Corps Staff as well. The battalion established a lasting reputation for expert wiring, and the type of entanglement adapted became standardized as "Yellow-line wire." In no small measure the success of the work was due to the thoroughness of the arrangements made in the Orderly Room. C. Company were much indebted to Captain Newman's device of going up in the early morning and utilizing the early daylight, which greatly expedited the work, and was a perfectly safe proceeding owing to the mistiness of these winter mornings, the mist being for all practical purposes as efficient a cover as the Cimmerian darkness of the nights, whose intensity made the intricacies of wiring no easy matter and quite impossible except for thoroughly skilled men. Later on B. Company joined in this very extensive wiring operation, in the course of which thousands of yards of entanglement were erected.

From December 16th till January 7th the battalion was again employed upon the C.T.'s, and by the latter date it had the satisfaction of knowing that its untiring efforts had prevailed over the inclement elements, and that the whole trench

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system was in a more stable, stronger condition than when we had first entered the area months before. Billets in Courcelles had been wonderfully improved by the aid of our carpenters and bricklayers, and quite a jovial Christmas Day and New Year's Eve had been celebrated there, although the village was severely shelled at Christmas time. But it was with intense thankfulness that everyone took leave of that most depressing front. It had been miserable and desolate, and for most of the time extremely active. It had been a long trying sojourn under stress of abominable weather and constant heavy shell-fire, in a barren, squalid countryside, which provided no means of enlivenment. There had inevitably been a good deal of sickness, and the battalion had been badly under strength both in officers and men. The demands made upon those fit for duty had been correspondingly severe. Perhaps, however, the most honourable feature of this period in the record of the 20th was the cheerfulness and doggedness of those who were very far from fit and yet persisted in carrying on as usual.

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Chapter V.

THE BATTLE OF ARRAS.

(*Arras, Monchy-le-Preux*).

On January 8th, 1917, the battalion marched into Bus-lès-Artois, and there mounted on to motor lorries, and were conveyed to Montrelet. It was a long and terribly cold ride in the snow and hard frost of the winter night, for the destination was not reached until after twelve. The following morning the move was completed by a short march into Candas, where B. and C. Companies and Headquarters were billeted, while A. and D. Companies were accommodated in the neighbouring village of Fienvillers. The Division was out on rest, but the battalion was kept employed, though not very heavily, on the big R.E. dump at the station and on a G.H.Q. ammunition dump in the vicinity. Work at the former consisted principally of unloading trainfuls of R.E. material. Trains due at 2 in the afternoon had an irritating habit of turning up somewhere about 10, so that the work was apt to be night work. The job at the ammunition dump consisted in sorting shells.

One does not remember the stay at Candas for this sort of employment, but chiefly for the intense cold that prevailed the whole time. Stoves were stoked with unremitting energy, coal being "scrounged" with a fair amount of success at the

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railway sidings, and all one's belongings were heaped up in a mountain on the top of one's bed to keep out the biting air, but the cold penetrated all the same. We had cause for thankfulness that we were in billets, not in trenches or in the flimsy canvas marquees, which we helped to erect as a rest camp for men going on leave from Candas station. The leave train was usually about 12 hours late, or it may have been 48—it was difficult to say how many days it lost in a month. One remembers also the joint mess run by Headquarters and the two Companies in Candas—a system in which the Colonel greatly believed. One remembers also visits to Doullens, which was within easy reach, and the incomparable Chablis Moutonne at the "Quatre Fils" there. Regretfully one has learnt since that no such chablis exists anywhere else in the world.

On January 28th, the Candas stay ended, and the battalion departed for a different army area altogether. General Haldane, who had commanded the 3rd Division up till the Treux days, now commanded the VIth. Corps in General Allenby's Third Army. He wanted his old Division in his Corps, and thither we were bound. The first day's march was to Sarton. It was a most bitter day, and the Nissen huts, which were our habitation that night, were atrociously cold. The frost was so intense that fires could not be lighted, and some officers at all events had to go dinnerless to bed. An entertainment given at short notice by a concert party belonging to a unit stationed in Sarton was a most depressing failure. Next day we moved on

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to Haute Visée, where half the battalion stayed, and to Ransart, where the other half battalion was billeted. The 30th found us after a long very cold march in the pleasing village of Oeuf, many miles west of the line, where exceptionally good billets were obtained. The following day brought another lengthy march, especially for C. and D. companies. The whole battalion was to have been billeted in Bailleul aux Corneilles, but there was not room enough, so the left half-battalion had to go on another four very long and weary miles into Magnicourt. The succeeding stage was to Ambrines, a very pleasant spot, where the battalion split up. A. and B. moved into Izel-les-Hameaux, and under orders of the C.E. VIth Corps, worked on the erection of Armstrong huts and on bunking; while Head-quarters with C. and D. proceeded straight to the line at Arras. At Etrun, the junction of the Ambrines Road with the main St. Pol—Arras thoroughfare, we had to wait until after dusk, as thenceforward the road was in view of the enemy. It was a most horribly cold wait, but once started, with only another four miles over the *pavé*, we were soon entering the ancient city of Arras by the Baudimont gate.

Despite unpleasant enough happenings there at a future date, the memory of Arras is a very pleasant one. Arras was the skeleton of a town, but it *was* a town, and as such was a welcome contrast from the debraggled villages one had recently been accustomed to near the line. It was an intense frost and glorious moonlight as we entered the city that evening, February 3rd, and

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the buildings had a spectral beauty in the silver radiance. There were magnificent billets for both officers and men in large mansions. Officers dined in mess rooms furnished with armchairs, ottomans and thick cushions. Yet one could reach the front line from there in half-an-hour. The splendour of these billets, some of which became divisional headquarters subsequently, paled somewhat when the thaw came and the shrapnel-riddled roofs let the water through into the bedrooms in buckets-full, but a pioneer battalion always had the means to deal effectively with such a nuisance as this.

In those days the Arras front was really most charmingly quiet. The persistent east wind meant a perpetual "gas alert," but no gas attack ever came, and except for occasional trench-mortaring in the front and support lines, and the machine-guns which played on the Rue de Ritz—our approach to the trenches—we really had nothing to bother us. While a very strict discipline was enforced in daylight to prevent all movement in the streets, after sundown the town, to all appearances utterly dead and deserted up to then, came to life, and soldiers and the handful of faithful civilians (who lived in cellars), issued out into the streets, and a busy trade throve in a score of little shops in the Rue Gambetta, where stationery, souvenirs of Arras, and other such trinkets were sold. The "Pom Poms" gave a nightly vaudeville entertainment in a "pukka" entertainment hall. Such shows were a great feature of life in Arras all through our sojourn there. At different times there were to be seen the "Van Johns," the "Bow Bells," the "Jolly

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Boys," the "Thistles," etc. Altogether there was a certain piquancy in life at Arras because of its astonishing contrasts.

Our bit of front lay actually in the town, or rather one of its eastern suburbs, the Faubourg St. Sauveur. At first, being in advance of our own infantry, we were attached to the 12th Division, whose C.R.E.'s ambition was evidently to cut up the ground into the greatest possible number of C.T.'s, and our first job was the construction of new ones. One had perforce to be driven right through the foundations of a house, and excavating a trench in such circumstances is a tough piece of work. As soon as our own C.R.E. came on the scene, this senseless programme of new construction was at once stopped. One only of the new trenches—Twenty Street—was persisted in; for the rest Colonel Elliott was of opinion that there would be quite enough to do in maintaining the existing ones. In addition to the trench work, there was some dug-out construction done in co-operation with the Cheshire R.E.'s. A few days later, when the right-half battalion joined up with the remainder, six platoons from C. and D. companies respectively were despatched to the villages of Liencourt and Wanquetin in the rear of the Corps area to work on hutting, for the accommodation of those large bodies of troops which it was intended to bring on to this front in the near future. For the next few weeks the troops remaining in Arras were almost entirely employed on maintaining the principal C.T.'s—Imperial, Iceland, Fifteen Street and Twenty Street. When the thaw came about, this meant a

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great deal of heavy work in revetting and draining, for the trenches simply fell in. As time went on, the front very sensibly livened up and a good deal of repairing was needed of the damage done by shell and heavy trench mortar fire. Raids were launched on our own and neighbouring divisional sectors, and enemy retaliation was sometimes very severe, particularly on Imperial Street, where work under such conditions was apt to become distinctly uncomfortable and casualties were sustained, which must have been more numerous had it not been for the protection of the tunnel underneath the trench, to which several shafts gave access. During these weeks, the C.O. instituted a series of lectures and discussions among officers upon various branches of pioneer work.

Early in March the battalion's activities came to have a more obvious reference to impending active operations. For example a big trench, known as Circular Trench, running through Saint Sauveur and Ronville, was constructed for the assembly of assaulting troops. Forward dumps were created on the Cambrai Road, and much was done to fit for use those remarkable chalk caves under these two faubourgs, which played so important a part in connection with the battle of Arras, as they afforded such magnificent shelter for stores and for large numbers of men only a very short distance behind the front line. One of these caves was discovered by the battalion in rather an odd way. When trench digging before the thaw, one of the men suddenly found to his great astonishment that the resistance of the frozen ground to

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his pick suddenly ceased most incomprehensibly. There was indeed no bottom to that piece of trench. The cave beneath was first christened "Pioneer," and then "Aladdin's Cave," and here Van Nesse took up residence, in charge of a large bomb store.

Arras itself tended to become less of a health resort during March. German guns sought for our batteries hidden in the town, and big 8 inch shells were pitched into the station and the Rue Gambetta. The station had been rather a "windy" sort of place from the first. It had a bad reputation even in those peaceful days. One's normal route to the Rue de Ritz or the trenches lay through the station or at any rate across the lines just outside it. When avoiding the station itself during one of these "strafes," Lieut. Fearby suffered a number of unfortunate casualties with a platoon of D Company. The battalion's R.E. store on the Rue Denfert also came in for severe treatment, and other casualties were incurred there.

The battle of Arras was to be preceeded by a big five days' bombardment; and in anticipation of retaliation, all troops in Arras were sent into cellars. The precaution was wise, but the town was very little troubled as events turned out. Life in the cellars those five days, especially as little work had to be done, was very slack and pleasant and exceedingly cheerful. In one company mess a birthday was celebrated with such success that the O.C. prohibited any more till further orders. On the last three nights, the Pioneers filled in the trenches and shell holes, and generally cleared for traffic the Cambrai Road up to our firing line, and

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then only a few hours before zero amid the fury of our bombardment and of enemy retaliation, they removed the big barricade on the road, which protected our section of it from the enemy.

The excellemt plan had been adopted ere this of explaining to the men the nature and scope of the forthcoming operations (so far as we knew them), the precise part they would have to play in them, and the significance of that part in the general scheme of the attack. The two tasks allotted to the Pioneers were to render the Cambrai road, smashed up as it had been by years of shell pounding, fit for traffic as far as Estaminet corner at Tilloy-les-Mofflaines, and to construct a mule track for artillery use from near Twenty Street out to a point south of Tilloy. The plan of attack was an initial violent blow to be followed up with the utmost rapidity by a succession of further blows, which should ensure a complete break through. In the accomplishment of this purpose the immediate opening up of communications with the captured positions was imperative. Guns must be moved forward without delay. Mobility was the watch-word. The Cambrai road in particular was quite indispensable. It was the obvious main artery for the moving forward of guns and supplies. Thus the rôle of the Pioneers was of first-rate importance.

There was a natural fear that the road might prove to be mined, and the suspicion that this was so seemed to be confirmed by the evidence of one of the first prisoners taken on the morning of April 9th, when the battle opened. Lieut. Gabel therefore went forward to reconnoitre and to discover the

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whereabouts of mines and booby traps if any such there might be. Happily there were none, and the initial shock of the attack had been so great as to hurl back the enemy even from such strongholds as the elaborate network of trenches, south of Tilloy, known as the Harp, without any great resistance. That day the enemy forces were largely disorganised. The two Pioneer battalions on the Cambrai road, were, accordingly, left comparatively undisturbed, and with astonishing rapidity they made good a practicable track in the centre of the road, sufficient to bear guns and limbers. The work was continued next day, the whole width of the road being rendered fit for heavy traffic. The evening of the 9th and the morning of the 10th were a time of high expectations. Large quantities of horse artillery were brought up and squadrons of cavalry came into evidence. The Army Commander made it clear in a communication we all received from him that he believed the great break-through had been accomplished. He was badly deceived, for things were already going wrong when he penned this missive. In the first place, the weather had broken. The rain of the 9th was succeeded by bitterly cold snow blizzards on the 10th, and the succeeding days were no better. The enemy recovered from the initial shock and their resistance greatly stiffened at Guémappe, Monchy-le-Preux, etc. Monchy-le-Preux was the commanding position of the whole district east of Arras. Against it the cavalry were hurled and the result was a shambles ; it was indeed taken after heavy fighting by the infantry, but just east of it and of Guémappe and Wancourt, our

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advance was definitely arrested. During these days of disappointment, April 12th—23rd, the battalion was occupied still on the Cambrai road, now between Estaminet Corner and the Bois des Boeufs. The achievements on this highway were subsequently immortalised by a ballad, the words written by Fearby, which a glee party of D. Company officers used to sing with great effect. It contained a particularly popular reference to Sec.-Lieut. P. G. Clarke, who at this time discharged the very grim duty—henceforward always entrusted to an officer of the battalion during active operations—of organising the search for, over the battlefield, the identification and burial of the dead of the 3rd Division. Clarke, it should be mentioned, did this ghastly work with great efficiency. It was at this same period that the battalion's concert party, the Swifts, which had an active career later on, came to be first organised.

On April 24th, the battalion moved forward from Arras to quarters in the old German trenches just south of Tilloy-les-Mofflaines. On May 2nd, owing to a slight alteration in divisional boundaries, it crossed the Cambrai road to corresponding trenches north of Tilloy. The weather was fine and the trenches not uncomfortable. But the period which now ensued, April 25th to May 15th, was one of the worst experienced by the battalion, and many considered that the terrors of Monchy, where the 3rd Division was now in line, equalled those of the Somme. Certainly for sheer concentration of furious shelling on a comparatively small area, the slopes to the east, north and south of

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that accursed spot could hardly have been surpassed. In addition to this the whole length of the Cambrai road, and particularly at the La Bergère cross-roads, was most unhealthy, and indeed all the approaches from Tilloy to Monchy, however carefully selected, were apt to be very nasty. From the moment of leaving camp, night after night, to the moment of return, there was not a moment's security, and very serious unpleasantness somewhere or another was a foregone conclusion. The conditions at Monchy were indeed the very worst conceivable for the activities of a Pioneer unit. An offensive movement had been decisively checked just to the east of a key position, which the enemy were determined either to retake or to render ineffective for our observation purposes. The life of the garrison was harassed by perpetual barrages; but the lot of the Pioneers was even less desirable. Moving backwards and forwards day in and day out, working for the most part unprotected in the open, there were no snug shelters for them. Casualties were constant and inevitably heavy. On all, but particularly on the officers, the strain of this sort of existence was very severe. Officers in charge of each night's operations had not only the trying responsibility of pushing through work at all costs under conditions which often appeared to make all work impossible, but they had the added anxiety of uncertainty as to the whole position. The front was not yet established, trenches frequently changed hands, the Germans sometimes proved to be where our own troops were supposed to be in possession. The situation, as carefully explained by the C.O.

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in the afternoon, had altered by the time the companies arrived on the scene of action. Thus to the actual casualties sustained there had to be added, in computing the toll of Monchy on the 20th, the severe mental strain and stress which it involved. The battalion's accomplishment in these circumstances was immensely to its credit, and its reputation was correspondingly enhanced. By the time it was withdrawn a genuine trench system had been erected and efficiently wired; by its efforts the Monchy position could be said to have been thoroughly consolidated.

The battalion's first task was the wiring of the principal line, in those early days called Shrapnel trench, and the support trench behind it, closer into Monchy, East trench. A C.T. was dug from Shrapnel to Hill, the front line, the C.T. afterwards being named Canister.

There was trouble from the start. On the very first night of work, there were losses under the severe barrage put down at La Bergère, and at Shrapnel trench Captain Avila was severely wounded while superintending B. Company's wiring under a hail of shells.

The night of April 27th-28th was a very bad one indeed, C. Company suffering heavily. Out of over thirty men of No. 10 Platoon, one man only escaped unhurt, fifteen being killed or mortally wounded. A tremendous barrage fire was put down all round Monchy, and the whole length of the Cambrai road was enfiladed. It seemed impossible for the transport to succeed in bringing up the necessary wiring materials to the appointed spot for our dump in

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Hussar Lane, but Strang managed it, and for his courage and coolness on this occasion was awarded the Military Cross. Work was accomplished under exceedingly heavy shell-fire and machine-gun fire. Perhaps an even more trying ordeal was that of the night of April 30th—May 1st. A big new attack on a thirteen mile front was imminent, and the Pioneers were ordered to construct new trenches in preparation. D. Company successfully linked up a line of shell holes, and so made an assembly trench of 400 yard's length. The other three companies were deputed to dig a trench running from Arrow Head Copse to Bit Lane, to form an advance jumping-off position for the attack, and this task was regarded as of the utmost importance. Captain Banks went in advance to tape-out, together with Captain Williams, a most courageous and resolute officer, long a tower of strength to C. Company, especially in tight corners, and now its Commander. Immediately Banks rose to tape-out, he was shot dead through the head with a bullet evidently fired at very short range. Williams, who was following Banks, tried to reach him, but the instant he raised his head above ground, he was greeted with a bullet. It was obvious that they had stumbled upon a nest of German snipers; also that where one man dared not show his head above ground a large body of men could not possibly work. Williams kept the companies, when they came up, at a safe distance, and then went for instructions to the 76th Brigade Headquarters. The Brigadier had only one suggestion to offer, that the snipers should be bombed out, and he sent instructions to

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one of the battalions in the line to organise a bombing raid. The battalion in question was on the very point of being relieved, and did not act on these instructions. Had it done so, the trench would have been no nearer being dug. On that excessively nervy front where a jumpy sentry's volley might in a moment unloose all the guns on either side and precipitate a violent cannonade, a bombing raid would probably have created a general uproar in the vicinity of Arrow Head Copse most effectively prohibitive of such an occupation as digging.

A further job at Monchy consisted of digging and wiring a fire-trench running through the wooded grounds in front of the château to the north-east of the village, a total distance of 900 yards. It was not an easy trench to make, because of the trees and undergrowth in the wood, which rendered drainage a difficult problem. This, known as Orchard Trench, was subsequently joined up by a C.T. with the system occupied by the 12th Division on our left. East and Canister were improved, and work was also done on a very lengthy C.T. called Vine, which eventually ran from its junction with East Trench south of Monchy across Hussar Lane and a considerable distance westward. The object was to give protection for the approach to Monchy and save casualties. In a sense it did afford protection, because, once it appeared, the Germans so concentrated their attention upon it that keeping to the open some little distance away from it one was comparatively secure.

In anticipation of an attack by the 76th Brigade, D. Company moved upon the 12th to a forward

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assembly position; but the attack failed, so that there was nothing for them to do. These preparations for "stunts" which failed to come off were sometimes as trying as actual operations.

It was with great relief that the 20th turned their backs upon the "gallant" little village on the night of the 14th and marched away through Arras to Talavera camp in Agnez-les-Duisans, which was reached at midnight. But even as we marched, a dispatch rider had given the C.O. the unwelcome news that we must return to Arras as corps reserve. The indignation and disappointment of some of the officers at this intelligence was intense. It found vent in various ways, one officer assaulting the Nissen huts we tenanted that night with a tomahawk, another finding solace in the contemplation of the philosophy of Marcus Aurelius. As a matter of fact, being in corps reserve in Arras proved quite agreeable, as we had good billets, had no work and only stopped for six days. On the 22nd we set out for a real rest to the charming village of Liencourt, a good bit west of Arras. Here training was very keen, but there were heaps of enjoyment. The afternoon was devoted to cricket and football, and a particularly vigorous round of football matches culminated in a Homeric conflict between B. and C., in which the latter was victorious by a narrow margin. The valley of the Canche and the adjoining country, through Etrée-Wamin, Denier and Canettemont, was very pretty. Riding was the officers' main recreation, and riding through that green verdant countryside was a contrast to the brown scorched earth east of Arras to which we had become

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accustomed, which restored body and mind. There was only one untoward event during those happy days of Liencourt, and even that was funny. The transport officer—at that time Brodribb—could not even with the best will in the world meet the demand for horses. In these circumstances, some venturesome spirits did not draw the line at mounting mules. Among these was P. G. Clarke, whose attempt to incite his leisurely and obstinate quadruped to greater activity by blowing a whistle shrilly in its ear caused that much-tried animal to buck and give its rider a severe fall, as the result of which his days in France were numbered.

On June 2nd the Division returned to the Monchy front and the 20th retraced its steps to the trenches north of Tilloy. The companies started work at once, converting part of Vine Lane and West Orchard into fire trenches, wiring Orchard between Harness Lane and Bit Lane, connecting Snaffle and East trenches. Other jobs were the wiring of East and the improvement of Bridoon Lane. On these several tasks the battalion was engaged till the 14th. The front had become a great deal quieter than on our previous experience of the locality, and so far there had been little to complain of. The weather was exceedingly hot, and officers spent the daytime clad in the scantiest of clothing, and in taking frequent plunges into an old zinc bath that someone found in the vicinity. We were better off at this time in the open at Tilloy than in billets in Arras, because the Germans had brought up a mighty 14 in. gun with which they shelled the town in the mornings, while they bombed it from aircraft at night.

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But we were not destined to spend the whole time so peacefully, for on June 14th, the 76th Brigade carried out a surprise attack upon the German positions on Infantry Hill, and captured two lines of trenches, Hook and Long. C. Company, and half of B., under the command of Captain Williams, had gone up to quarters in the caves under Les Fossées Farm, near La Bergère, to co-operate with the attacking brigade. Their task was to be the linking up of our original front line, Hill, with Hook trench, by means of two C.T.'s. We feared a counter-attack during our work, but much to our relief, the inevitable counter-attack came off several hours before the troops went up to Hill. There was some shelling with H.E. and gas, but on the whole, the night was quiet and good progress was made. But there was not time before dawn to complete the two trenches, and on the night, June 15th-16th, the companies went up again to the work. While digging, they were caught in an intense barrage, which was preparatory to a counter-attack. Work was, of course, at once abandoned and the Pioneers joined the line troops, 2nd Suffolks, in manning Hook Trench. The counter-attack failed, but the enemy fire was so heavy that the casualties were inevitable, and altogether this was one of the worst experiences in the battalion's history. The whole trench area suffered, and companies further in rear, working in Pick and Grape trenches, also had a very bad time. But the night of June 17th-18th brought an even worse experience. The Germans, determined to regain the Infantry Hill positions, had brought up a large number of batteries from other

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sectors and concentrated them upon the few hundred yards represented by Long and Hook trenches. Once more C. Company and half B. were working at the completion of their two C.T.'s when a terrific hurricane of fire was poured upon the vicinity, and the C.T.'s themselves were almost completely flattened out. Once again the Pioneers helped the Suffolks to repel the German attack. It is a miracle that there were any survivors left to tell the tale. Had Sec.-Lieut. Armitage, who showed the greatest courage and presence of mind, taken his men of No. 9 platoon to the right of the junction of the C.T. with Hook instead of to the left, the result would have been disastrous. On the right, the enemy had the exact range of the trench, and practically every man of the Suffolks there was either killed or wounded. Where Armitage happened to be, happily the trench was not so accurately "taped." As on the previous occasion, so on this, the other companies also had a nasty time of it where they were, viz., in Vine Lane, but B. and C. were right in the thick of the attack, and great credit attached to Captain Williams and the officers under him for their gallant and resolute handling of a desperate situation, as also to the rank and file under them, who showed unbounded confidence in their leaders.*

* Col. Elliott sent, together with his own congratulations, the follow- letter from General Ollivant, temporarily in command of the Division:—

"I have received a report from G.O.C. 76th Inf. Bde. that the 20th K.R.R.C. did excellent work on the 14-18th June, digging C.T.s from Hill to Hook Trench and that during the German attack two platoons under Capt. Williams manned Hook Trench on the left of the Suffolks and held on most gallantly during the attack.

I should like to congratulate all ranks on the way in which they contributed to the success of the operation on those dates, and to assure them that their services were most highly appreciated."

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The battalion's casualties had inevitably been serious in its two periods at Monchy. One officer, Sec. Lieut. Thorn, was killed and ten or eleven others were wounded or went down with bad shell-shock. Lieut. Penna returned to the battalion from England one day and had his arm shot off the same evening; Johnson who had been twice slightly wounded at Arras during the previous weeks, was badly hit on his first night up at Monchy; Oliver, one of the most experienced engineers and coolest leaders we had, was also lost to us. Perry, McConnell, Hill were also badly hit. Other officers' casualties were those of Holford-Strevens, Flood, McConnell, Ovenden, and Brooke, in addition to Avila, already mentioned.

On the afternoon of the 19th, the battalion marched into Arras, next day on to Lattre-St. Quentin; on the 21st into Denier, where a halt was made and training carried on for six days; next into Grouches, just north of Doullens for three days; and then on July 1st, entrainment at Doullens and a railway journey viâ Candas over the devastated region the Boches had made in their retreat to the Hindenburg Line, past the spot where once were Serre and Puisieux-au-Mont, to Achiet-le-Grand; thence by road to Achiet-le-Petit.

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Chapter VI.

THE THIRD BATTLE OF YPRES.

(Opposite Cambrai—Zonnebeke—St. Julien).

The next episode of the battalion's career does not call for a detailed account, because it was a quiet and happy one in the main, and there were no "stunts." The Division was now in the IVth. Corps on a very extended front, in the devastated country facing Cambrai. But, despite its devastation, it had a charm of its own in places. The Boches had cut down many fruit trees, but on the other hand many fine woodlands were left standing, and the villages of Velu, Lebucquière and Haplincourt, smashed up as they were, had a sylvan prettiness. The ruined houses were not so badly knocked about but that they could easily be adapted by Pioneers as billets, and the men as a whole—but especially perhaps B. Company in Beaumetz-les-Cambrai—made themselves quite charming habitations, with little gardens sometimes, which showed genuine artistry. The battalion was spilt up, Headquarters being at first at Haplincourt, then at Lebucquière, A. Company at Morchies, B. and C. at Beaumetz, D. in a sunken road not far from Hermies.

There was no continuous trench line, the front being held by a number of posts; while in the south, near Hermies and the Canal du Nord, opposite Havrincourt, the British and German lines came

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close to one another, further north they were many hundred yards apart. Thus, while Hermies and Demicourt, a little further north, could be quite unhealthy, Boursies was generally quite agreeable. There could be vigorous counter-battery work on occasion and there were every now and again enemy raids—notably on post R.9, which created a fair amount of unpleasantness; but had the war been everywhere and always as it was on the Havrincourt front, it would have been a tolerably agreeable kind of war, and incidentally it would never have come to an end. There were good opportunities for recreation, though the fields were inevitably rough. Yet grounds could be found for football, to which the height of summer was never in the Tommy's eyes any deterrent. There were allotments of leave for both officers and men to Amiens; and in September a party of one officer and over thirty men had a fortnight's holiday at the Third Army Rest Camp at St. Valery-sur-Somme.

The battalion accomplished a vast amount of first-class work whilst on this front. In the first place it completely wired the entire front line and also the intermediate line, a distance of about 30,000 yards of wire of Yellow Line standard. The erection of this immense quantity of entanglement was expedited by the fact that carrying parties were provided from the infantry, so that the entire strength of the Pioneers could be devoted to the actual wiring. In some cases it was possible to bring the transport wagons with their loads of wiring material as far forward as 200 yards of the front line. Infantry covering parties were also supplied when-

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ever (as was for the most part the case) the work was done in No-Man's Land. In the second place, the battalion was employed on the improvement of a number of the posts, on building up fire-steps, draining, etc., and in the construction of deep dug-outs in the posts. The 20th had done a good deal of this mining work before, but always under the guidance of R.E. officers; now the entire direction was placed in the hands of the Pioneers themselves. Unquestionably, the good repute of the battalion, increased by the work done on the Serre and Arras fronts, was still further enhanced in this quiet sector. It was while we were here, at the end of July, that Colonel Inglis, who had done so much for the 20th, left us, being succeeded in the command by Major Jenkins.

On September 5th, the Division left the line for a training area, and the battalion at Bertincourt carried out a programme of training and sports and competitions for ten days. It then proceeded viâ Achiet le Petit to Miraumont, where it entrained *en route* for Flanders. Ever since the commencement of the third battle of Ypres on July 31st, it had been anticipated that the 3rd Division would be sent north, and indeed the surprising thing was that the order to move did not come earlier. The railway journey was good for a troop train. We left Miraumont at 3.50 p.m. and proceeding viâ Arras, Aubigny, Berguette and Hazebrouck, reached the point of detrainment, near Poperinghe, at 1.30 a.m. This was a station constructed by railway engineers and christened by some wag with the name "Hopoutre" (Hop out R.E.) which, pro-

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nounced as a dissyllable, had a truly Flemish sound. After unloading the train, the battalion marched to Reay camp near Abeille under the shadow of the Mont des Cats. The camp was pleasant, situated as it was in a pretty enclosed country of orchards and hop-gardens. The small town of Watou was easy of access, and here were shops, canteens, estaminets, and small restaurants. It was possible to get further afield—to the picturesque town of Cassel, looking from its steep hill over all the plain of Flanders; and here, in the Belle Sauvage, on September 21st, there took place surely one of the most enjoyable little dinner parties ever celebrated by a party of officers in France.

In the mornings at Reay camp we carried on with all branches of infantry training, a large part of the time in gas-masks. Mustard gas had made its advent some time before, and although we on the Havrincourt front had not met it, we knew we were bound to make its acquaintance where we were going to. Lurid tales used to come down to us from the line about the mud and massacre there; so that it was with a cheerfully resigned pessimism that on the 22nd we moved off to Ypres. We had a tea interval between Poperinghe and Brandhoek surrounded by deep bomb holes and dead horses—an eloquent presage of the aeroplane raids we were to suffer from in the near future. Our camp, just on the western outskirts of Ypres, consisted of tents of an alarming newness and whiteness. As Captain Thomas—the battalion's expert in sardonic humour—put it, "Away behind the line we get thoroughly camouflaged tents, but the *moment* we get near the

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line, up go white tents blazing in the sunshine, saying to the Boche ; ' Here we are ! ' " An advance party had been busy all afternoon in daubing them with mud, but as they had carried on this operation under the eyes of a German plane, there was not a great deal of comfort in this. Whether in consequence of the visit of that German scout or not, our first night in the camp was most unpleasant, everybody being wakened by the flash and detonation of high velocity shells bursting so unpleasantly close as to pelt all the tents with the earth they ploughed up. In truth the camp was never agreeable at night. Gothas sprinkled the whole neighbourhood with their bombs, and on one occasion a huge " aerial torpedo " pitched right into the middle of the camp. Happily it was a dud ; otherwise it must have blown a good many of us to blazes.

Work consisted at first of making and improving communications in the forward area, in laying duck-board tracks for infantry, clearing a nine foot way for limbers on the morass which was once the Potijze-Zonnebeke road, building a bridge for carriage of tanks, repairing mule tracks. The 3rd Division were under orders to take part in a general attack on September 26th, in which their task was the capture of Zonnebeke. On the night of the 24th—one of furious bombardment—C. Company built up a clear pathway across the water-logged land formed by the Hanebeek up to the shell holes held by us as a front line for the assemblage of the assulting troops on the morning of the attack. They also carried forward to the front line a large

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supply of hurdles for the use of the infantry in crossing the Steenbeek, which would have to be passed in the attack on Zonnebeke.

On the day of the battle, B. and C. Companies were attached to the 8th and 76th Brigades respectively for consolidation. A.'s task was to construct a C.T. joining up the old front line with the line to be captured; D,'s to construct a track good for limbers along what was once the Ypres-Zonnebeke road. The day was one of chequered fortunes, as the result of which little of the intended Pioneer work was accomplished. C. Company, under Captain Williams, was the only one that succeeded in completing its task. Their objective was a certain St. Joseph's Institute on the western outskirts of Zonnebeke. Like many other localities with high-sounding names in the district, it was not easily identifiable. The entire panorama was always much of a muchness, compounded of mud, shell holes, water, bits of barbed wire, and those litters of abandoned amınunition, rifles and equipment, which could be lumped together under the general term salvage. In such a landscape it was not easy to decide which particular small lump of bricks represented St. Joseph's Institute or any other building that had once existed. Ordered forward at 2 p.m., C. Company found their scene of operations, but were unable to commence work owing to the battle conditions, until 8 p.m. Once started, they did what was asked of them—linked up shell holes round the Institute and protected the line with concertina wire. In days when the appearance of anything recognisable as a trench was likely

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to be greeted promptly with an artillery pounding, it may be doubted whether "consolidation" was of any value to the infantry for the holding of a captured position, but that was a matter for the staff to decide; the 20th had duly to carry out instructions.

Part of B. Company pushed well forward for *their* consolidation work, but met with disaster. Of the two officers, one, the very popular Lieut. Graham, of the Scottish Rifles, attached to the 20th since Candas days, was killed and one, Sec.-Lieut. Bourke, who had only recently joined, was badly wounded; three of the sergeants were killed, three others wounded. There were twenty other casualties in the party. Work was impossible, for the simple reason that all those in responsibility, who were in touch with the situation, had become casualties. Captain Bidencope himself, another party of B. Company, under Lieut. Ryding, and the whole of A. and B. Companies were prevented from reaching the scene of operations, owing to untoward circumstances which developed in the evening. According to the Commander-in-Chief's dispatch there is evidence that the Germans had themselves been intending a "stunt" on the 26th, and therefore had on the spot a large number of troops who, while forestalled in their own attack, were available for counter-attack. Accordingly, under a very heavy drum fire, the enemy, on a wide front, attempted to recover their lost positions. There then ensued in some quarters a definite retirement on the part of the British, and on the battle front generally a phase of confusion and uncertainty—which was a phenomenon of the Great War, with

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which all those who had intimate acquaintance with front line work were familiar, but which never figured in newspapers or dispatches. Rumour flew on wings. Brigadiers, commanders of heavy batteries in rear, having no conception of what the actual situation in front might be, could only surmise that the Boches had broken through, and arm themselves and any troops they could lay hands on, to defend their own headquarters or their guns as the case might be. It was the fate of most of the parties of the Pioneers, in these circumstances, to be grabbed on their way forward, either for the purpose of turning back men who were making their way rearward, or else to man positions, supposed to be threatened by an enemy who, as a matter of fact, had never been so ambitious as to contemplate so deep an advance. Not the least objectionable job in connection with this battle was that of Lieut. Langridge as D.B.O. and his burial party who had a most ghastly and repulsive time of it.

On the 27th, 28th, 29th and 30th, work was done on the Ypres-Zonnebeke road and on infantry tracks, a particularly valuable passage over the Zonnebeke morass for getting supplies forward to the infantry being constructed by B. Company, and then together with the rest of the Division the Battalion came out and spent a night at Brandhoek, where our transport had been, and realised from experience what an infernal place it was owing to the Gotha bombers, who visited it that night as they had most nights. The next stage in our move was by bus, which landed us near Winnezeele on the night of October 2nd. Next day we marched viâ Balem-

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berg to the villages of Oost Houck and Buysscheure, where billets were conveniently scattered, but where training was carried on until October 10th. It was at this juncture that Colonel Martin, who had on September 30th rejoined the battalion after his long absence, formally took over the command of the battalion from Colonel Jenkins, who reverted to second-in-command. Colonel Jenkins the following Spring was appointed to the command of a battalion of the Monmouth Regiment. He was killed whilst gallantly leading an attack on an obstinate machine-gun post during the Great Advance in the Autumn of 1918. Colonel Martin, who had always been exceedingly popular, was welcomed back with the heartiest good will.

For the next five or six weeks the 20th were disjoined from the 3rd Division which moved right away from the Flanders area. The battalion now came under the orders of the Vth Corps. So long did this separation last that rumour got busy with the idea that henceforward we were to become definitely Corps troops and should never see the Division again. As the lot of Corps troops was always easier than that of Divisional troops, there were some who hoped that this would prove to be the case. As a matter of fact, the first use the Corps made of us was to attach us temporarily to the 9th Division, and we certainly did not have an easy time with them. We were billeted in dug-outs on the Canal Bank, a little to the north of Ypres, just off the Boesinghe road, not far from the scene of the battalion's first breaking in to active service in the early 1916 days. These quarters were much

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preferable to the open camp we had last been in; indeed, they were the best in the neighbourhood, and one could sleep with a quiet mind, knowing that one was comparatively secure from the persistent bombing raids, which took place in daylight as well as at night. One afternoon several casualties were sustained from bombs dropped between the road and the little Yperlee stream, just outside the dug-outs, among the men in the battalion normally most immune from such dangers, the cooks and sanitary men. On another occasion, just as we were congratulating ourselves that we were to have no casualties to report that day, in pleasant contrast to each previous day since we had arrived in the line, the last platoon to return to quarters, under Lieut. Paterson, came directly under bombing planes when on the duck-board track a few hundred yards from the Canal, and had ten men hit, including their officer who was dangerously wounded, but recovered.

The battalion's work while with the 9th Division was all in the same and most accursed area, just beyond St. Julien, called the "Triangle." Here we accomplished three main jobs—the laying of a part of a new plank road, forming one arm of the Triangle; the conversion into something recognizable as a road of the appalling stretch of churned-up mud, which went by the name of Springfield road; and the construction, just east of this, of a tramway for artillery use. The last of these undertakings was the most interesting, and everyone engaged upon it realised that he was doing work of the most immediate practical value. Some pioneer work

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had to be done to meet all sorts of possible contingencies, which often never arose at all, so that one did not see any fruit to one's labours. But here was the case of a brigade of field artillery in dire straits because they simply could not move their guns into their allotted battle positions in the Triangle since the ground was mere bog. The gunner Colonel—a Canon in peace time—was in despair. Gabel came to his rescue with the tramway and, owing to the Pioneers' energies, all the guns were in their places by the appointed time. The construction of the tram-line, and the moving forward of those guns cost many valuable lives, for the Triangle was a great centre of all kinds of traffic of war, and a magnificent target for the enemy's artillery. Every morning at precisely eleven, a heavy barrage used to come down on the line of the Poelcappelle road; so it was well to be beyond St. Julien before the hour. St. Julien itself, the whole of the Triangle area and the duckboard tracks, both near St. Julien and near Alberta, used to come in for heavy treatment. On October 17th the artillery barrage was particularly violent and extensive. It commenced just before C. Company came up for its turn of duty. To a less resolute and discerning eye than Captain Williams's, it might have appeared impossible to penetrate it. To have attempted to do so along any of the tracks would have been to court disaster; but Williams successfully led his men across the morass of the Steenbeek, and a thoroughly satisfactory day's work was accomplished on the tramway, despite the heavy shell fire which prevailed all day. In the battalion

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orders of the day the C.O. warmly commended and personally thanked the company for the grit displayed in penetrating the barrage and sticking to its work in such conditions. Altogether, the 20th Battalion served the 9th Division well and thoroughly deserved the sincere letter of thanks received from its G.O.C. The work of Lieut. Gabel was specially singled out for mention.

The 9th Division being relieved, new work was found for the 20th. On October 29th it marched away from the Canal Bank to Siege camp, a dirty and unpleasant one, near Dawson's Corner, and for the remainder of its sojourn in the Ypres area—a matter of nine days—worked with a Canadian Railway Construction engineer unit. The Canadians proved to be very pleasant fellows to get on with, and the light-railway work was both interesting and comparatively free from danger. It consisted of maintaining the track right along from the Canal Bank, viâ Admiral's Road on to the less healthy neighbourhood of Kitchener's Wood and St. Julien. Parties working in this more forward district sometimes found conditions none too healthy, but westward of Admiral's Road there was usually little to worry about except bombs, which were on occasion sprayed about the railway by the Gothas. Most of us would have been well content to remain permanently working with the Canadians on this pleasant job, as we were given to understand was to be the case, but our own Division had need of us and was impatient for our return.

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Chapter VII.

THE GREAT GERMAN OFFENSIVE IN THE SOUTH.

(Bullecourt—Henin).

The 3rd Division was in the south, holding the line in front of Bullecourt and round to Noreuil and Lagnicourt on the right. The Australians had had heavy fighting here in the Spring, but the front had been devoid of "stunts" on the whole since, although when on the Morchies-Hermies sector in the Summer, we had sometimes heard the thunder of guns away to the north and said: "That's Bullecourt again." From Dawson's Corner to Bullecourt through rear areas was a pretty lengthy journey, but it was accomplished very rapidly. Indeed, this was the severest continuous marching the battalion had done so far in France. On November 5th, we moved on foot from Dawson's Corner to Elverdinghe, there entrained, and were conveyed to Proven; whence a short march took us to Houtkerque. The next day's march was the longest we ever made in France. Starting at 8.45 we proceeded viâ Steenvoorde and Hazebrouk into the Forêt de Nieppe. The hamlet of La Motte in the forest was intended as our resting place for the night, but there proved to be no room, and we had to go on to the scattered little township of Caudescure. Such unexpected prolongations of marches, already

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long enough, were always trying, and it made the distance covered this day twenty-one miles; yet only one man definitely fell out. October 7th brought us viâ Merville and Robecq to Gonnehem; the next day we went on through Oblinghem, Béthune and Noeux-les-Mines to Hersin. Next morning we at once climbed on to the high plateau which stretches eastwards to Notre Dame de Lorette and the scenes of the futile and terrible French offensive of May, 1915; thence past St. Eloy, we made our way into familiar Arras and once again billeted there. On the 10th we swung along the straight Arras-Bapaume Road, past Beaurains, Ervillers, Béhagnies to our Divisional Headquarters at Favreuil. We had an unexpectedly triumphal reception, for the Divisional band turned out to greet us and escorted us for the rest of the way, while General Deverell and his staff stood outside H.Q. for the march past. Reports of the admirable work done by the battalion during the last few weeks had preceded us, and we were welcomed back with enthusiasm.

The battalion's quarters were somewhat scattered, some on each side of the Beugnâtre-Ecoust road, others in Vaulx-Vraucourt. They were all pretty comfortable, and the country, although desolate enough, was by no means repulsive. There were, of course, no civilians within miles, and for amusements and recreation we had to depend exclusively upon Army resources and principally upon ourselves. For officers, there was the VI. Corps Club at Béhagnies, and there was the usual supply of cinemas and canteens. There was no

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inducement to go far afield. Bapaume was the nearest place of size in the neighbourhood, but it was a most depressing piece of ruin, and the officers' club there was the most uninviting in France. Arras was too far off to be reached in one's time off duty.

We had been summoned back to our Division for "stunt" purposes. The sensational battle of Cambrai had been planned, and the 3rd Division was to play a subsidiary part in it. While the actual advance was to be made further south, the 3rd Division was instructed to capture the enemy front line in the Bullecourt sector and, in the event of a thorough break through in the main theatre of action, to pin the garrison to the position, so that it might with luck be cut off altogether. In preparation for this minor operation, the battalion was employed on improving communications up to the front; filling in large craters in Ecoust, which seriously impeded traffic; clearing, draining and metalling the Sucrerie-Ecoust-Bullecourt road and the Vaulx-Noreuil road. Perhaps as a blind a piece of wiring was carried out in front of the support line between Stanhope Redoubt and Otley Reserve.

After the attack the Ecoust-Bullecourt road was pushed right through to the old front line and made good up to the church in the village, which was pretty far forward. A long new C.T. was dug connecting up the old and new front lines, called Pelican Lane. Work was also done in a much shorter one, Saddler Lane. The new front line was completely wired. Other work during these very busy days at the end of November and the beginning of December comprised the "slabbing" of the

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Vaulx—Noreuil road (i.e. the laying of timbers in place of metal) and the wiring of a great deal of the support line, the whole of London Support, Pudsey Support, Ilkley Support and Halifax Support, Pontefract and Dewsbury trenches on the right of Noreuil. In the latter district there was a very nasty place, by name Iggoree Corner, which had to be negotiated going to and from the trenches, and some jumpy moments were experienced there on more than one occasion.

The even tenor of our work was interrupted on December 12th in a way which was sinister, because it was prophetic of worse things to come. We knew of course that, despite the tremendous efforts made by the British during 1917, the war was going badly. We had heard only vague rumours of the terrible failure of Nivelle's offensive in the Spring, and the consequent blow to the French Army, but we all knew of Caporetto and realised that owing to the Russian revolution the eastern front had broken down, and that Germany was able to transfer troops from Russia to France. Early in December, Colonel Martin knew from Divisional H.Q. that there was a special massing of enemy troops in our neighbourhood and that there was need of extra watchfulness. We had instructions to be ready at any moment for a German "stunt." At 6.30 a.m. on December 12th we were all routed out of bed by the Adjutant, and the noise coming from the line at once told us why. The Germans were attacking. We duly stood to, but were not wanted, and that night carried on with our ordinary work. On the 14th we were given a new job in

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consequence of the happenings of the 12th. Between Bullecourt and Noreuil, our line took a right-angle turn just at the junction of London and Pudsey. Here the Germans had launched their attack and they had succeeded in cutting off the apex. Both our front and support lines had gone in this neighbourhood and a re-entrant right-angle had been created. This new angle was formed by two C.T.'s, the one, Tank Avenue running roughly north and south; the other, Tower, running roughly east and west. Neither of these were fire-trenches, and they were not fitted for defensive purposes. It was obviously necessary that a new front line should be created in this quarter; it was equally obvious that the Pioneers would have to create it. The new fire-trench, which was of very considerable length, ran from the junction of our front line and Tank Avenue on the left in a south-easterly direction over to the so-called Horse-shoe Redoubt off Tower Trench on the right. The new trench was christened after our Colonel, and the temptation being obvious, was duly named Martin's Lane, though the word 'Lane,' often applied to communication trenches, was not very appropriate for a front line. The trench was afterwards wired by the Pioneers.

Ere this, on the 15th, we had shifted our quarters and the whole battalion was now billeted together in a camp at Mory.

There would be no object in recounting in detail the large amount of construction accomplished in the second half of the month. Apart from work done on the tramway by a party under Sec.-Lieut. Black, it was almost entirely wiring, and an immense

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amount of this was done, especially in front of Tank Avenue, Tower, London, and Railway Reserve. Such huge quantities of entanglement had been erected by us in this trench system before we came away that we were confident it had been rendered impregnable, and no doubt it was, in so far as wire could make it so. How little that availed was to be proved in terrible fashion at this very spot on March 21st and 22nd, 1918.

The front could be accurately described as a moderately quiet to fairly lively one. Both shells and machine-guns were a nuisance at times, the worst experience being on December 23rd when two platoons of B. Company, under Sec.-Lieuts. Stangoe and Pickett, were caught by heavy shell-fire when they were wiring Railway Reserve. In addition to the Pioneers, there were considerable numbers of infantry working on the top above the trench, and it is probable that some movement was observed by the enemy who sent over one salvo after another at his human target. Good work was done by both Stangoe and Pickett in helping the wounded men and getting them into shelter. Pickett was slightly wounded, but instead of going to hospital, decided to remain at duty, for which he paid the penalty of suffering from blood poisoning for the next three months. One remembers of this Bullecourt sector the extreme muddiness of the roads, the narrowness of the trenches, causing irritating delays to one when there were brigade reliefs in progress, and perhaps most of all the intense blackness of the winter nights and the consequent difficulty of finding one's way in the open amid old wire and new.

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There was no work on Christmas Day, which was devoted to appropriate games and festivities; then followed four more nights of wiring. Thus ended 1917, a very trying and arduous year for the 20th. Four officers had been killed, twenty-six wounded, and there had been hundreds of casualties among the rank and file. There had been rewards in the shape of the D.S.O. for Colonel Inglis, five M.C.'s and one D.C.M., eleven M.M.'s and thirteen Mentions in Despatches.

On December 30th, we shifted quarters to Durrow Camp and there put in a period of training till January 12th. Incidentally we spent some time in building up earth breastworks cemented with expanded metal to protect our huts against possible bomb splinters, as bomb dropping from aeroplanes was a not unusual occurrence in the early mornings in this area. From a direct hit, there could, of course, be no security. There was also some very keen football. There was equally keen weather—very heavy falls of snow and intense frost. Indeed, the wintry conditions were about on a par with those that had prevailed at Candas a twelve-month before.

On January 12th the battalion recommenced line work under orders of the VIth Corps, to which the 3rd Division had now for the second time been given. The concentrated work on the Bullecourt sector had admittedly not been of a routine nature; it had been done as part of a general protective scheme against the likelihood of a German offensive in the near future. The new employment of the battalion was on another defensive system, in what

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was now termed the 1st Battle Zone. The conception underlying this nomenclature was that in the event of an exceedingly powerful attack such as was anticipated, the trench system at present held should be regarded as an outpost line only, and that a withdrawal should be made to the positions in rear which we were helping to prepare. The line we were now making was further north than Bullecourt; its right was at Croisilles and thence it stretched northwards over the high ground of Henin Hill. Another line, which we also did something on, was still further in rear of this, and crossed the Croisilles—Henin road, in a north-westerly direction towards Boiry-Becquerelle. No attempt was, as a rule, made to dig these reserve trenches to their full depth; usually they were left only about three feet deep. But while the battalion did a little trench digging, its chief task was wiring the positions, and in ten days some 14,000 yards of double-apron entanglement were put up. This was thoroughly agreeable labour for the arrangements went like clockwork; it was possible to work in the late afternoons and evening twilight; there was no shelling to bother one, and consequently the work was delightfully rapid, and as efficient as it was rapid.

On the 28th the work was changed. Headquarters moved from Mory to the cutting at the Henin end of the Henin—Croisilles road, where B. Company was also billeted. A. and C. Companies moved into the remarkable electrically-lighted chalk caves under the ruins of the church in Croisilles, and D. Company into dug-outs at Neuville Vitasse

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on the Wancourt road. The battalion was acting under orders of the Division once again.

No work that the battalion ever did was of greater consequence than that which it accomplished in the succeeding period, which closed on March 29th. Its sheer amount is very remarkable. To understand its significance it is necessary to take into consideration the nature of the front which the Division was now holding, in every expectation that before it was relieved it was likely to have to defend its position against a most formidable enemy assault. Owing to the very marked shortage of men in France at this period, the Divisional front, although not apparently so spun out as in several cases in the Fifth Army area further south, was inordinately extensive, particularly at first when it ran from in front of Croisilles in the south up to and just beyond the Arras—Cambrai road at Cavalry Farm. Later on it was somewhat curtailed, the 34th Division taking over the bit in front of Croisilles. But even at that it was an extended line. We had already become familiar with its southern and central sectors owing to the work we had been doing in the Battle zone. The northern extremity we knew of old, for we had often looked across at it from Monchy-le-Preux. The peculiarity of the front was that it was divided into three well-defined segments by two river valleys—the Sensée and the Cojeul. They were tiny enough streams, indeed the Sensée was a narrow river bed only, there was no water in it. The Cojeul, further north, was a real stream, which at one place, in front of Wancourt, broadened out into a shallow mere. Between the two rivers valley,

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the ground rose fairly sharply, and reached the 105 metre contour immediately behind Croisilles, and again on the plateau east of Henin, which was known as Henin Hill; while there was similar high ground in front of Wancourt and Heninel, on the eastern bank of the Cojeul which reached its summit at the point where Wancourt Tower once had stood —a badly ploughed up spot, because the Germans used it for calibration purposes. Generally speaking, the British front and support lines were sited on the forward slope of these little heights, and for most of the distance they overlooked the enemy. South of the Sensée our front and support trenches consisted of the great German Hindenburg line, and were here called Tunnel and Burg Support respectively; but north of the Sensée, as the Hindenburg line continued its north-westerly direction, while the British front as created by the battle of Arras bore north-north-east, the two Hindenburg trenches ceased to be fire-trenches and became C.T.'s, a use which they were far better adapted for, owing to their great width; they afforded poor protection from shell fire, but were magnificent for traffic. In this section, north of the Sensée, the names of Tunnel and Burg Support changed to Shaft and Hind respectively. Underneath Tunnel and Shaft, and, of course, giving those names to it, ran the great Hindenburg tunnel with its various dug-outs. Shaft and Hind were destined to be of some consequence for fighting purposes after March 21st.

To begin with the allocation of work was as follows:—C. Company was responsible for the Sensée defences, D. for those of the Cojeul, while

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A. and B. Companies worked under orders of 8th and 9th Brigade respectively. There was also, as usual, a tramway party, this time under Lieut. Gabel. Tramway jobs were generally looked on as pleasant, but this one proved none too agreeable and Gabel's men sustained some nasty casualties.

As there was a distinct break in the programme, and indeed in the battalion's history for that matter at the end of February, that month's performances may be considered first. In that period C. Company completely wired with a double-rowed entanglement the Sensée defence system which, starting on the right at Burg Support, first of all ran along an existing C.T., Nelly Avenue, and thence onwards became an entirely new trench which, after crossing the valley, ascended the high ground to the north-westward and joined Hind at its junction with Farmer's Lane. They subsequently wired another new trench know as Sensée Avenue which, running parallel with the Sensée and just north of it, joined the main Sensée defence line with Hind at its junction with Fop Lane. They also wired several of the old trenches, Fuldner at the left end of the Sensée line, Fop Lane at the end of the Avenue, Lincoln Reserve, a trench opening off Nelly and behind Burg.

D. Company commenced by erecting special Guémappe defences; next they wired the so-called Blue line, a long reserve system starting from Shaft on the right and following along Grey Street and First Avenue, through a maze of trenches known as the Rookery; so along Egret and Panther, across the Cojeul and in front of Guémappe. They followed

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this up by similar work on another reserve line, rather further forward, indeed sometimes close to the support line which consisted of Gannet, Kestrel and Shikar trenches. All this work, excellently organised under the direction of Captain Chambers, at this time in command of D., met with the warmest approval of the 76th Brigade, which occupied this section of the Divisional front.

A. Company, commanded by Captain Thomas, who had taken over on Banks' death, under orders of the 8th Brigade, were engaged on the right section. They alone of the four companies were given almost entirely front line work to do, and only quite near the end of the month were they given anything else. They wired the front line from the extreme right of the Division's area to the Fontaine—Croisilles road. At some points in the vicinity of Fontaine itself the British and German lines came uncomfortably close and altogether this was not too pleasant a job. Later on, they also wired part of Burg, Nelly and its continuation, Janet.

B. Company (Captain Bidencope) worked on the centre of the Division's front, which was held by the 9th Brigade, and were for the greater part of their time occupied in wiring the support trenches —Bullfinch, Swift, Curtain; but as the support line was only a very short distance behind the front line, it was in no way preferable. Some front line work was also done, and there was a good deal of trouble from trench-mortar activity, especially on February 17th. At the end of the month, B., like the other companies, were put on the wiring of reserve lines and worked on First Avenue, Cuckoo

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and Concrete trenches. Unquestionably during the month of February, A. and B. Companies had the least agreeable jobs and C. the most agreeable. The latter company, though shelled once or twice, had little to bother it as a general rule, except the stream of machine-gun bullets which was sprayed at night over the Sensée valley. Here, when wiring Sensée Avenue, an officer who had been with us only a short while, Sec.-Lieut. Cokes, was hit in the thigh. His leg had afterwards to be amputated. To those who took no part in the battalion's labours during these weeks, the lists of trenches given above will appear a list merely of names; but to those who did take part they will recall memories of much good work punctually and thoroughly accomplished at a critical period.

On February 26th there took place the changes in the battalion already mentioned. Owing to shortness of man power at this time all infantry brigades were reduced from four battalions to three. This meant economy in headquarter establishments and increased the rifle strength per unit. A corresponding change was made in all pioneer battalions; they were reduced from a four company to a three company establishment. It was naturally with the utmost reluctance that Colonel Martin agreed to this new arrangement, against which protest was of course useless. D. Company had to be sacrificed. Every one in D. was of course intensely disgusted, but every company regretted the disappearance of one of the quartette, which had had a distinct character and tradition of its own. In men like Inglis, Furnell, Wallace, Banks, Penna, Fearby,

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Holford-Strevens, Brooks, etc., it had included some of the outstanding personalities among the battalion officers, and perhaps latterly its mess had been the most genuinely jolly and light-hearted of the four. The rank and file too were a fine set of men, and comprised some of the best workers in the battalion. On the night of the 25th, on return from work in the line, the company in their billets at Neuville Vitasse celebrated the end of its separate existence as a company, with good spirits mingled with regret. Next day, officers and men were divided up among the other three companies, and C., leaving Croisilles, took over the Neuville Vitasse billets and the pioneer work in the 76th Brigade area.

One other change in the battalion, which had taken place before this, should be recorded. Furnell had been succeeded in the orderly room by George Selmes, who, after a long continuous period of solid work for his company, B., had been Assistant-Adjutant since Arras days and who had both as a platoon-commander and in the second capacity made himself popular with one and all by reason of his honesty, good nature and good sense. Furnell had gone into "G" office at Divisional H.Q. and started a most successful career as a staff officer, in the course of which he became Staff Captain of the 76th Brigade and finally a D.A.A.G. with a Majority. The 20th has reason to be proud of the fact that it gave the 3rd Division one of the strongest and most efficient staff officers it ever had. As Assistant-Adjutant, Lieut. Ryding was appointed, and he continued in this post until after the arrival

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in Germany he became Camp-Commandant and Aide-de-Camp to General Deverell.

The Division about this time was closed up, handing over the trenches south of the Sensée to the 34th Division. The 76th Brigade remaining on the left, the 9th Brigade now held the right flank, and the 8th Brigade came in between. A. Company, who of course had to evacuate the Croisilles caves in consequence of these new arrangements, joined B. Company and Headquarters in the sunken road at Henin.

In March the greater part of the battalion's work was wiring, A. Company putting up double-apron fences along Grey Street and Brown Support; B. along Egret, Cuckoo, Mallard and Gannet trenches; C. in front of Key trench and across the Cambrai road to its northern side, and in front of Buzzard and Buck Reserve. Two new trenches also were dug—one connecting Grey Street with First Avenue, which effected a great straightening of the Blue Line, the other from Kestrel to Lion trench. But perhaps the most interesting, because the uncommonest tasks undertaken by the battalion, were in the 76th Brigade area. Despite its marshy character, the Cojeul valley seems to have given the G.O.C. most anxiety of any part of the front. In February, D. Company had continued to fix wire right across these marshes near Guémappe, and now C. Company continued the job, which their predecessors had begun, of literally festooning the river bed with wire. This would, in itself, have been a nasty obstacle for advancing infantry, but the G.O.C. had in his mind's eye a tank attack from the

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Cojeul Valley, and to prevent this, he decided to flood it thoroughly. Tanks, judging from experience of our own in Flanders, would make little progress in waterlogged country. To the East Ridings (R.E.) and C. Company, therefore, was entrusted the building of a dam. This was duly carried out, and proved a most wet and miserable job, particularly nasty because it was done on two phenomenally pitch-dark nights, and because on one of them there was some very nasty shelling. Another device against tank attack was the sowing of the ground in the slopes to the south of the Cojeul with bombs, which was intended to blow up any tanks which went over them.

From information obtained from a captured prisoner it was anticipated that the much vaunted German offensive would certainly include the 3rd Division's front in its onslaught, and it was also expected that the attack would be launched on the 13th. Accordingly the previous night there was a most terrific bombardment by our artillery, warranted to break up any concentration of hostile troops. Millions of shells were expended on the Third and Fifth Armies' fronts, but no attack took place; there was not even a reply to our furious shelling. Such an expenditure of shell could not be afforded night by night indefinitely but each following night there were intermittent bursts of harassing fire. There was much fear of a gas attack of unprecedented severity, and largely on this account the Pioneers had to 'stand to' between 5 and 7 a.m. —a trying thing for men who had only come in from hard work in the line and turned in an hour or

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two before. The attack actually came, as all the world knows, on the early morning of March 21st, the first warning being the terrific din of a gas attack on Monchy at 4.30, this being almost immediately followed by a huge bombardment of the whole front from the Cambrai road southward as far as the eye could reach. Judging from experience of our own offensives, we did not expect any sensational break through, especially as we had confidence in the strength of the British front. We were, therefore, astounded and horrified when Headquarters at lunch time received the intelligence that the enemy had smashed through the line at Bullecourt, which we had fondly imagined so strong, and were actually in Ecoust, which meant of course that the whole of the 3rd Division's front, which was being staunchly held, was in process to being turned from the south. Curiously enough, the only troops of the 20th, who suffered from the events of the 21st, were those furthest from the scene of operations—a party under Sec.-Lieut. Armitage, which had been working in dug-outs for Divisional Headquarters at Boileau-au-Mont. The Germans turned some heavy guns on to the railway and Headquarters at this point, and several of Armitage's men were caught. Although everyone naturally felt very anxious, after hearing the news about Bullecourt and Ecoust, nothing untoward occurred on the 21st, either at Henin or at Neuville Vitasse, the home of the detached C. Company. Several German aeroplanes flew over the Henin sunken road in the afternoon, spotting the batteries in the vicinity and firing their machine-guns, but they did no damage to anyone in the road.

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So far as the 3rd Division and the 20th were concerned, the next day was a good deal more eventful. The dawn was again very misty, but the bombardment was not at once renewed, although about 8 a.m. shells landed in the Henin road, and one blew A. Company's cooker to bits. During the morning the barrage got going, and was particularly heavy on the whole Divisional front about noon, when orders were received for A. and B. Companies to be sent up to reinforce the 9th Brigade, who were being hard pressed. The officers of the companies in question made a very careful survey of the shell-bespattered landscape, and B. Company thought they discerned a rift in the barrage, a part at all events where it was less thick. They then moved off in sections at fifty yards intervals, and with marvellous good luck managed to gain the Hindenburg line without casualties. A. Company were not so fortunate. B. Company took up a position in Hind trench, A. Company in Shaft behind them. The trenches were not at all healthy, because they were being heavily bombarded, and every now and again a shell burst right in. Several casualties were incurred early in the afternoon from the shelling. Shortly afterwards orders came to withdraw from the trench into the tunnel so as to avoid losses. After a little, an excited individual rushed down the shaft crying that the enemy had broken in, and were bombing their way down it. As it was impossible either to verify or disprove such a report, B. Company officers, preferring not to risk being caught like rats in a trap, took their men above ground to be met by Captain Bidencope

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with the news that they were to hold the extreme right flank of the brigade. The line across the Henin-Croisilles road had by this time fallen and the 3rd Division's flank was completely in the air. Remnants of the unhappy 34th Division presently joined B. Company in the trench, which they had injunctions to hold at all costs. In case of its loss, A. Company, behind them, were under orders to organise an immediate counter-attack. The outlook looked exceedingly black, especially as there was obviously no adequate artillery support behind. Battery after battery had drawn out during the day; there seemed to be only one gun left, on the whole front. That heroic 18-pounder, in Heninel, continued to fire steadily hour after hour.

In the meantime, Battalion Headquarters in Henin had been having an anxious time. By 3 p.m. they knew that the line on Henin Hill had broken; 34th Division stragglers continued to pass down the road. The German patrols were not much more than 500 yards away. Headquarters therefore decided to withdraw and join C. Company at Neuville Vitasse. Since mid-day the latter Company had been out of touch with the general situation. The fact that carrier pigeons were brought down the Wancourt road to 76th Brigade Headquarters and that the traffic men withdrew from the road under orders seemed ominous; and the line of fire could be seen advancing on the right over Henin Hill. The telephone wires being cut, it was impossible to get into touch with Battalion Headquarters. Nothing could be done except to reconnoitre the nearest trenches, the Neuville

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Vitasse Switch, with a view to holding out there in case the line did prove to have been broken, as appeared to be the case. The arrival of the Colonel and his staff was very welcome and re-assuring. It was hoped to spend the night in billets, which were, however, shelled about tea-time. But at 7 p.m. orders came for the remainder of the battalion to join A. and B. Companies in support of the 9th Brigade. The move was made via St. Martin-sur-Cojeul and Héninel, and under orders of General Potter, commanding the 9th Brigade, C. Company took up a position in Earl's Court and Crow trenches, where they could reinforce either the front or the flank, as required. The outlook for the morrow looked desperate in the extreme; indeed annihilation seemed the likeliest prospect. As a matter of fact, the Higher Command had already decided on voluntary retirement. The withdrawal was carried out with great smoothness and skill, C. Company being the last troops to leave. The Hindenburg line was evacuated by 4.30 a.m. As there was nothing whatever to protect the flank during this movement, it was of course hazardous, and offered a magnificent chance to the enemy, had he but discovered what was happening. Dreadfully tired out, the companies reached the rendezvous at the Northumberland lines, Mercatel. After a short rest they were despatched further back to Wailly. This seemed like turning away even from the sounds of war into a region remote from dangers. Such escape had its attractiveness; on the other hand, everybody was profoundly depressed by the events of the day. Everything seemed to be going

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to pieces, and what would have pleased everyone best would have been the opportunity to rush in and try to stop the rot. As a matter of fact, the idea that Wailly was a haven of perfect peace was disproved the moment we entered the village, for there lay across the road a smashed wagon and dead horses belonging to our transport. We learnt afterwards that our very popular Quartermaster, Lieut. Heath, had been wounded.

Next morning, the companies were sent forward to convert into practical usefulness a shallow disused trench system, which stretched from Mercatel across the Arras-Achiet-le-Grand railway to Ficheux, in a south-westerly direction. Should the line which the Division was now holding behind Neuville-Vitasse fall, or a further retirement on this front be necessitated by events further south, this so-called Purple Line would at once be brought into use. Never was pioneer work more urgently needed; never was it done with greater verve and thoroughness. The task of digging and wiring those trenches was carried through with immense dash and energy by men thoroughly awake to the importance of what they were about. One day, the men, having done a six hours stretch, after a brief interval, went at it again and completed another six hours shift and finished all the wiring at one go. On the night, March 24th–25th, in bitterly cold weather, they slept out in the open, but the two subsequent nights were spent in Bellacourt, whither Headquarters had now migrated from Wailly. The work of these days was supervised by the senior company commander, Captain Bidencope, who was in general

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charge on the scene of operations. While these operations were in progress, alarming tales came in of the happenings on the Fifth Army front, and to the south we watched the smoke of battle travelling further back, and the great black columns of smoke which announced the destruction of our dumps at Bapaume.

March 28th was one of the decisive turning-points of the war. That morning, we were awakened by particularly heavy drum fire, and knew that heavy fighting must be in progress. Soon Colonel Martin received orders to man the Purple Line with the battalion and the three R.E. companies, which were also placed under his command. It was feared that, although a splendid defence was being put up, the infantry might eventually be forced back. If they were, they would retire to the Purple Line and find a nucleus of defenders already there, fresh men to aid and cheer those who had been fighting all the day. Happily this did not become necessary. The German attempt to break the pivot of the British defences by the capture of Arras and the Vimy Ridge was a complete failure. All day the garrison of the Purple Line was employed in improving their trenches, which they stocked with large stores of S.A.A. It poured heavily after mid-day, and the trenches became muddier and muddier, and there was no protection. At night, Colonel Martin was informed that he was about to be relieved by two Canadian Brigades. These began to appear about 3 a.m., but the relief was not completed till 8.30 a.m. When a whole brigade, without any previous arrangement or plan, takes over a line held by only

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a single battalion, there is likely to be some confusion, especially when it is very dark and very wet.

The relief of the 20th was owing to the fact that the whole 3rd Division, after one of the most glorious days in its history, had been relieved. Next day a short evening march brought the battalion to the village of Gouy, where accommodation was very inadequate; on the 30th it arrived at Sus-St.-Leger. On April 1st the march was continued to Etrée Wamin, where buses were ready for the next stage, which was via Frévent and St. Pol to Bruay. Here much needed baths were obtained for officers and men in the pit-head baths, and everybody was greatly freshened up and cheered up by a good rest and the hospitality of the kind civilian folk of the place. On the 4th came the last stage of the journey, through Houchin and Noeux-les-Mines, a district familiar from experience in 1916, into Les Brebis. This was the peaceful First Army area, and the battalion looked forward to quiet days. Not a shell had fallen in Les Brebis for months. On the night of the 7th they started to fall. Next day we began to suspect that something sinister was happening even in the First Army area.

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Chapter VIII.

THE GREAT GERMAN OFFENSIVE IN THE NORTH.

(*Locon and Hinges*).

Several battle-worn divisions had been sent north from the severe fighting in the second battle of the Somme in order to recuperate. Some were already in the line; the 3rd for the moment was in reserve in the 1st Corps. We hoped and expected to remain in reserve for a week or two at least, seeing that since the middle of January we had been continuously in the line and had wound up with the terrible experiences of March 21st-28th, which had cost the Division very severe casualties. At Les Brebis the battalion received considerable reinforcements; most of the men were employed in infantry training; but about 100 men per company were each day put on work in connection with rear defences. These were off the main Lens road, between Philosophe and Loos, and the task was done quite light-heartedly. Yet it cost the battalion 56 casualties, mainly incurred on April 8th, the remainder next day. When C. Company's contingent went up to their job on the morning of the 8th, the front seemed quiet enough after the liveliness of the previous night. There was no shelling proceeding in their neighbourhood. There was a suggestion of the smell of onion in the

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air, and when rain began to fall the smell became more pronounced. The officer in charge decided to bring the men back. But the damage had already been done. A large percentage of the shells fired during the night had been gas shells and, the morning being still with a heavy atmosphere, the gas hung about the ground; there had been no breeze to dissipate it. Fifty out of the hundred men, including both officers, had to be admitted to hospital with mustard gas poisoning, and all were more or less affected. The remaining casualties were incurred in B. Company. The gas penetrated, though not in a dangerous concentration, into Les Brebis, and everyone was coughing and sneezing. Some children among the civilian inhabitants suffered rather badly.

The shelling of our area, particularly with gas, was, as we afterwards realised, part of that artillery preparation with which the Germans ushered in their second great offensive, that of April 9th, which had so great an initial success owing to the breaking of the line held by the Portuguese at Armentières. During the 9th, 10th and 11th the Germans pressed their advantage in the Lys valley, capturing Merville and Estaires, and getting to within dangerous distance of the important La Bassée Canal. Had the line of the Canal and Béthune itself fallen, not only would the invaluable Bruay mines have been lost, but the Vimy and Arras positions might have been turned and the British centre broken with disastrous consequences. The defence of the canal was of vital consequence, and the fight put up by the 55th Division at Givenchy was of the utmost value; but reinforce-

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ments were urgently needed, if only because the salient that the enemy attack was creating continued to widen and the front to be defended grew longer and longer. The 3rd, 4th and four other divisions were thrown into the battle.

This, although we did not know it at the time, was the reason of our suddenly receiving orders on the early morning of the 11th to proceed to Labourse. No sooner had we arrived there than we were moved on again. Evidently there had been a change of plan. We were now bidden to make for the main Noeux-les-Mines—Béthune Road and there await a convoy of motor lorries which were to convey us to a destination unknown. We had a long wait, but there were estaminets near to provide refreshments, and some of the men carried on a cheerful *al fresco* concert. While we were waiting, G.S.O.2 of the Division came along and explained the outlines of the situation. The 3rd Division was to make good certain bridgeheads over the La Bassée Canal, and hold the line of the canal against the enemy's advance. The motor convoy did not turn up till 6 p.m. It was to take us to Gonnehem. The direct road through Béthune was a short one, but the situation thereabouts was so doubtful that we were taken by a most roundabout route via Noeux-les-Mines, Marle-les-Mines and Chocques. It was late on a dark night when we disembarked. One man promptly fell into a stream—the Clarence river—by the roadside, and, with the weight of his equipment would very likely have been drowned, had not Sec. Lieut. Nisbet jumped into his rescue. From Gonnehem we marched absolutely into the

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unknown. The night was black and very quiet save when occasionally a high velocity shell would hurtle to earth somewhere near us, aimed at no apparent target. By a very circuitous road we reached our quarters for the night, in reality quite close to Gonnehem, at 4.30 a.m. Out billets were an abandoned aerodrome in the grounds of the Chateau de Werppe.

Next morning there was some consternation when we found a German observation balloon at a very short distance, looking straight into our habitation, and the transport cleared out in a hurry. Officers went off early with the C.O. to reconnoitre, and that evening the battalion went out to dig and wire strong points on the southern bank of the Canal on the high ground called Mt. Bernenchon. There was much natural uncertainty as to what might happen, but, on the other hand, we had the broad canal between us and the enemy, and, as a matter of fact, the night was quite peaceful and excellent work was done. The most notable feature of the night was the glare from many boats which were being burnt further up the canal to the westward near Robecq. The work was continued the following night, but thenceforward we were not concerned with the Mt. Bernenchon district, which was taken over by the 4th Division. On the 12th our own Division had been in action with the enemy at Locon, and had held him pinned there. The village itself was not secured, but, as events were to prove, the Germans had here reached their limit.

Such was the position when the battalion moved from the Chateau de Werppe into the village of

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Chocques, which was its domicile until the end of May. There we witnessed a sad sight, which we had already seen something of at Wailly and on our journey to Gonnehem, the departure of civilians, taking as many of their goods and chattels with them as they could put into trap or hand-barrow. These were incongruous days before the battle lines had been properly established. One heard of civilians calmly riding bicycles in the indeterminate No Man's Land between the opposing forces. Cattle and flocks were left in the fields. One night B. Company bore back from the line two stretchers in which were laid, not wounded men, but two good fat pigs, and the whole Company fed right royally on roast pork a day or two later. All sorts of vegetables were to be had for the trouble of picking them. Billets were excellent, sometimes luxurious, especially the château in Chocques, later on tenanted by Head-quarters and C. Company, with its sumptuous furniture, its ping-pong table, its grand piano, its asphalt tennis court; also the curé's house, where B. Company's Officers lived, with its very pleasant little garden and pond, which was used as a swimming pool.

The front which the Division held had three obvious sections, later on only two, because the one on the right was taken over by another division. The left section was to the west of the La Bassée Canal, which, after passing through Béthune, runs a little to the east of north for about a couple of miles. It then swings round and for some 3,000 yards runs north-west to a point a little east of Mt. Bernenchon, whence its direction becomes west north-west. Just

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inside the circumference of the sweep thus made is the village of Hinges; standing on the highest ground forward of Chocques, only 120 feet above sea level, it yet affords a commanding view over the absolutely flat plain of the Lys on the opposite side of the Canal. It was clearly a key-position, and, like all other key-positions on the front, it soon became a horrible nightmarish sort of place, while there came to be many trenches on the southern bank of the La Bassée Canal, the front line was on the north bank; but it was at first rather perilously close to the Canal, about 500 yards in advance of it only.

The second and centre section of the front was the Locon section. At Béthune the La Bassée Canal receives an important tributary, the Canal de la Lawe which, after a sharp westerly bend, tends in a north-easterly direction, so that a V-shaped tongue of land is formed between the two canals, in which (a good deal nearer to the Lawe Canal than to the other) is Locon with its orchards. The 3rd Division's line reached to within 500 yards of the village.

East of the Canal de la Lawe another V-shaped section was formed between that Canal and the road, called the Rue de Bois, which ran through the village of Essars just outside Béthune to Neuve Chapelle, now a long way behind the German line.

Such was the front which it was the task of the Pioneers, together with the R.E., to convert into a thoroughly entrenched position. As the third section did not occupy our attention beyond the first ten days or so, it may be accurately described as the Hinges-Locon front. The battalion got to

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know it thoroughly, for it worked there right on from April 11th to August 6th. Till very nearly the end of that long period the possibility of a critical attack was always in prospect, although, of course, it was greatest in the early days. As a matter of fact, there were two serious attacks on the night of April 17th—18th, and again on the early morning of the 22nd. At this time the battalion was short of several officers, who had to be lent to units of the 9th Brigade. C. Company had the satisfaction of learning later that the work done by them on the night of the 17th was of direct use in obstructing a German attack made only an hour or so after it had been done. This was wiring of an unorthodox character put up in front of the forward posts held by the N.F.'s on either side of the Rue de Bois. It was, in accordance with the wishes of the infantry, festooned between willow trees, across the road itself, strewn in ditches and behind hedges. There was plenty of trip-wire, and in the dark, at all events, none of the entanglements was visible more than a few yards away. The work was done in No Man's Land *in front* of the covering party, and one officer ran into a German patrol. This region, that of the Essars road, was none too healthy at this time, and the village of Essars itself was a pretty evil place. One of these nights B. Company had some nasty casualties on the road between Béthune and the village. The enemy had direct observation on the Rue de Bois, and could enfilade it, as they did to good purpose.

There is no need to give in detail the big programme of work successfully carried out by the

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20th during their stay on this Hinges-Locon front; still less to particularize between what was done by one Company, what by another. In those long weeks each of them became acquainted with the whole front, and did work in every part of it. Much the biggest part of the work consisted, as usual, of trench construction and wiring; there was also a little, but only a little, of the usual light railway work, and this came towards the end of the period. C. Company for a few days had the pleasant job of making dugouts for a brigade headquarters in the Canal bank at Béthune. Quite a novel task which came later on was the building of concrete machine-gun posts. This was taking a leaf out of the enemy's book which had been revealed to us in the battle for Passchendaele in the previous autumn, when German "pill-boxes" had defied even our heavy artillery. The usual practice was to erect the solid blocks of concrete inside the dilapidated walls of the red brick cottages on the Locon road or the farm buildings on the slopes of Hinges Hill; and in this way the most innocent-looking ruin of a house was transformed into an almost invulnerable machine-gun nest.

But after all the familiar digging and wiring were the occupation of the battalion nineteen nights out of twenty. Miles and miles of trench were dug, and tens of thousands of yards of wire put up. At first the front was held by a system of detached posts. As time went on, the rough posts dug, sometimes by the Pioneers, more often by the infantry when they first took up their positions, were connected together into regular defensive lines of very

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considerable extent. Thus, in front of Hinges, there came into being the Gordon line near the Canal; behind it the Suffolk line and the Suffolk Switch, the latter running actually through the village). On the left, behind the Suffolk line, was the Lancaster line, and behind all of these, and, indeed, behind the village itself, the Shropshire line. Similarly, on the Locon sector, there were the Aberdeen line in front, the Perth line and Perth Switch in rear of that and the Glasgow and Dunbarton lines.

Trench work in this area was a laborious business. The soil was exceedingly wet, and to dig down more than three feet was to reach the water level. To give trenches the necessary protection breastworks had to be made, the soil got from borrow pits dug in front or in rear of the trench. To give parapet and parados the thickness necessary to make them bullet-proof meant a vast amount of strenuous labour. In some places, where the ground was very much water-logged, the trench had to consist of practically nothing else but breastwork. We rather doubted the utility of such edifices, as they made very obvious targets, and could be easily pulverised by shell fire; but these were only made in reserve positions, and, as it happened, were never needed.

Most of the wiring was of the customary double-apron pattern, there being two fences close together in front of the trench, a third some little distance in advance. But latterly, under the orders of Colonel Pakenham Walsh, the new C.R.E., a much more elaborate kind of entanglement was evolved

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called " spider-webbing." It is sufficient to say that it was of a most intricate pattern, and so elaborate that it was with some difficulty that the men employed in putting it up were able to extricate themselves from it.

One feature of the battalion's operations is worthy of special reference—that is the protection of the flanks of the Divisional front. Hitherto we had been accustomed to working on trench systems facing the enemy only; but what had brought the Germans success in the March " push " had been " infiltration," *i.e.*, the pushing of troops through weak spots and the creation thereby of one new flank after another. Thus, under the new system of attack danger threatened from the flanks even more than from the front. We had had experience of this in the Hindenburg line; it had been the experience of division after division in the Third and Fifth Army areas. Thus it happened that the Hinges-Locon defences came to face all sorts of different directions from north-west to south-east. The left end of the Suffolk, well in the rear of the 4th Division's Mt. Bernenchon defences, was constructed with a view to the possibility of these being turned. One of the biggest jobs the battalion did was the making of the so-called Pioneer line, S.E. of Hinges, which protected the village in the event of the loss of the positions between the La Bassée Canal and the Canal de la Lawe and the consequent possibility of attack from that quarter. Other lines were dug along the Canal de la Lawe, going south-east, another, again, in the early days, between Essars and Le Hamel on the south-eastern side of

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the Rue de Bois. Behind, and to the west of Béthune, between the town and the village of Annezin, ran the Béthune Switch, consisting of breastworks, also facing the right flank. In a word, the battalion was never before the creator of such a thorough and comprehensive defensive system as that which it built up on the Hinges-Locon front. And behind this main system, south of the main Chocques-Béthune road, were many reserve lines, while there were others round about Gonnehem along the Clarence river, not constituted by the battalion, but of interest to it, because it would be called upon to man the one or the other in the event of such and such contingencies.

After the alarm of the April days had died down and the point of danger was either further north, about Bailleul and Mount Kemmel, or much further south about Rheims and Soissons, in the eyes of the British press, the Béthune front figured as "quiet." Our troops used to read such a statement with a mixture of irritation and sardonic amusement. They would have liked some of the newspaper fellows who write so glibly to come and see if they liked the "quiet" they spoke of. With considerable experience of other fronts to go upon, they were distinctly of opinion that this one was both noisy and nasty. It was certainly true that a good deal of the noise was at the expense of the enemy. Officers and men who had seen much of the war had been sceptical from their own observation when the papers declared the Germans were getting the worst of it were now of the opinion that they really were having a bad time in this vicinity

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at all events. The enemy had made a most uncomfortable salient for himself in the water-logged basin of the Lys. He had very little room for movement there, very little means of protection, and no opportunity at all for his favourite deep-mined dugouts. The salient was under excellent observation from all sides and scarcely a movement could take place unseen. The Germans had nearly always hitherto had the advantage of position; now they certainly had not. Night by night their communications were flogged by the harassing fire of our artillery, and very frequently in addition to this our "heavies" would fire what were called "concentrations" upon selected targets. The entire weight of all the guns in the Corps area would be directed in one terrific blast upon such favourite spots as Pacaut Wood or Locon and its orchards.

This was all very well, but it inevitably meant a certain amount of retaliation, and the Pioneers had to suffer from this time after time. During the British "strafe" up would go the variegated Germans' S.O.S. lights; their guns would open out and the shells descend upon the British lines near Hinges or opposite Locon as the case might be. But the hostile artillery could be active enough without any invitation from us. Trouble might be expected on any of the lines in either of the two sectors. The Gordon line was a particularly obnoxious one. Sometimes torrential salvoes would come over into that line at most unpleasantly brief intervals, and be at best a very alarming nuisance, and at worst a very dangerous and costly hindrance to all pioneer work. As a matter of fact, in every

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part of the divisional front heavy shelling was an almost invariable accompaniment of our work. It was remarkable under what seemingly impossible conditions work was carried out by the battalion owing to the coolness and determination of all concerned. The worst experiences of all occurred as the result of an attack made by the 76th Brigade on the night of June 14th–15th. By that time the British Army, as a whole, had grown very much stronger than in March and April, and minor offensive operations were being carried out on various parts of the front. The nearness of our front line to the Canal had always been a possible source of danger; it was resolved to push the line forward to the extent of some few hundred yards. The attack was a success, but for the next few nights the German artillery retaliation was very severe indeed. The approaches to the Canal, especially such bad spots as Hingette and Avelette received a lot of attention, but, indeed, the whole Canal region on either side was very unhealthy. But the worst of all were the newly-captured positions. It was under such conditions that the battalion had to carry out the duty of consolidating the new line. Both the getting up to the work and the work itself were horrible ordeals because of the heavy shelling. The two or three nights spent on this consolidation job were reminiscent of the worst days on the Somme in 1916 and at Monchy.

In addition to shrapnel and H.E. we had the perpetual nuisance of gas shelling. On one occasion Hinges became so saturated with gas that the best part of a brigade were laid *hors de combat* and the

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hill had to be entirely evacuated till the wind had cleared the fumes. We worked on the Locon sector exclusively for a little after that. Official gas regulations were so astutely devised that literal adherence to them made gas casualties a virtual impossibility; the framers of the regulations were, therefore, freed from all responsibility if any such casualties did occur. But to adhere to such rules was a great deal more difficult than to frame them. Had they been literally carried out by the battalion on the Hinges-Locon front, the men would have spent most of their time wearing gas respirators, their *moral* would have infallibly suffered, and their work would not have been done. The 20th suffered plenty of inconvenience—and the officers much anxiety—but remarkably little damage from gas shells, though they were a very frequent commodity and sneezing gas very frequent indeed. Gas was used a great deal when the Germans got wind of a brigade relief, as they sometimes managed to do. There was one particularly bad night, May 31st, when, during one of these reliefs, much damage was done with H.E. and gas and the 20th suffered with the infantry. There were no C.T.'s in the area owing to the nature of the ground and all access to the line was by road or track. That night all the approaches on the Locon sector were most thoroughly shelled.

Further back the roads through Béthune and the big Béthune-Chocques thoroughfare used to come in for frequent attention from guns of heavy calibre. It was a nasty experience to have to pass through Béthune when houses were being knocked to bits with 8 and 11 inch shells. If one landed on

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the hard *pavé* it had terrific spreading effect, and was apt to do terrible destruction. In any event shells in 1918 were more damaging things than they had been, say, in 1916; for even the heavy ones were often fitted with instantaneous fuze, and even a big 8-inch shell might leave very little trace on the softest of soil, which meant that it had horribly efficient man-killing power. Going to and fro to the trenches one had also to run the gauntlet of enemy aeroplanes. There was plenty of night bombing, and, in addition, planes would go up and down the Béthune road, turning their machine-guns on passing troops.

Such being the state of the front, it was inevitable that the battalion should suffer rather severe losses. A. Company were particularly unfortunate. They had a specially bad night on April 28th near Hinges, when shells landed right in the middle of a party of them and 23 men were hit. Captain Thomas had a most worrying and trying time. Ill luck seemed to dog his Company, and in nothing was it worse than its loss of two of the most efficient subalterns in the battalion, Sec. Lieut. Horwood, who died of wounds, and Lieut. Hastings Strange, who was badly wounded, but recovered. When he was hit Strange was acting as second-in-command of his company, and taping out the night's work. He had just started, when he was laid *hors de combat.* With admirable presence of mind his orderly, Rfn. C. R. Johnson, who, as it happened, had spent nearly all his time in the unit as a mess-waiter, carried on with the taping on his own, despite the shelling, for which piece of initiative he received the M.M.

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One of the worst features of the Béthune front was that all the back areas soon became so exceedingly unhealthy. Indeed, we were told by General Morland, who commanded the XIIIth Corps, in which we were, and who being an old 60th man, paid us an informal visit at Chocques, that the Corps were sustaining many more casualties in the back areas than in the trenches. The battalion certainly had immense trouble in the matter of billets. From the first Chocques was shelled, not very heavily, indeed, but fairly frequently; and there were, all told, a good many casualties in billets there even before the tragic *dénouement*. Rfn. Hilliard, the chief humorist of our Concert Party, was killed by a shell which pitched into the courtyard of Headquarters' mess, and there were a number of other fatalities as the result of direct hits on billets or the explosion of shells on the hard *pavé* of the road outside. At no time could one sleep or rest in Chocques with an entirely unapprehensive mind. But it did not become impossible to live in it until May 29th. The previous afternoon the Germans had been ranging on the village with air bursts of H.E. About twenty-four hours later a regular hurricane bombardment of the village began, and casualties came in from all quarters. Two of the very first shells pitched on the asphalt tennis court of the château, where some C. Company officers were playing. One of them, Sec.-Lieut. Brooks, one of the best of fellows, was killed. Another, Lieut. Holford-Strevens, had his arm nearly blown off. He had been wounded three times already, twice dangerously, the last time near Hermies.

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Nine men out of ten would have died as the result of this last terrible injury, but when dying words were expected of him he made jokes, and by his indomitable will power he pulled through. Another shell crashed through the roof of the curé's house among the officers' servants of B. Company, and the upper rooms poured blood. More and more wounded men were conveyed from their billets to the château, where our splendid battalion M.O., Dr. Masefield, bound them up as fast as they came. Fine work was done by Sergeant-Major Spain of C. Company in succouring wounded, and for this, together with many other fine services, he was afterwards awarded the D.C.M. On the whole the battalion was lucky to escape as well as it did. But it had had clear notice to quit. Nearly everybody spent that night out in the open.

Headquarters speedily removed into the sylvan retreat of the Bois de Marquet; B. Company found a suitable spot, where they were but little troubled by the railway midway between Chocques and Fourquereuil. C. Company had a more chequered experience. In any event, just after the Chocques disaster they had, under orders of the 8th Brigade, to take up their quarters with the infantry in the trenches, and they occupied the Dunbarton line. It was duly "strafed" and the house by the Canal used as an officers' mess got a shell through its roof, killing an infantry officer attached to the Company for messing; but, on the whole, quarters in the trench area proved distinctly less unhealthy than billets further back. When it went out the Company camped in a sunken road near Annezin, which proved

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to be as bad a place as Chocques, if not worse. Undoubtedly had there not been available deep trenches opening off the road on either side, there must have been many casualties; for the road and its environs were repatedly shelled at night or in early morning with 8-inch shells. Discretion being obviously the better part of a purposeless valour, a move was made to another site further back. This again was adjudged dangerous, owing to the proximity of numerous railway lines, and the Company finally moved to near the sand-pit outside Fouquereuil, where they remained practically unmolested. At a game of football, however, played near a farm midway between B. and C. Companies' billets, shells once seriously interfered with the play, one sergeant being wounded, but the game was played to a finish all the same.

Right at the end of July the enemy was found to be retreating on the Locon front. If so, Stangoe of B. Company remarked, he didn't appear to be taking any of his blasted shells with him, for the last night in the line was a bad one with losses. The same night came the glad news that the Division was going out. It had been in the line on this front for four months; it had had practically no rest since early in January. Even on a quiet front that would have been too long a spell; in the conditions that had prevailed during that critical period it had been a most trying experience for everyone; a relief from the constant nervous tension was urgently needed. While most honest members of a pioneer unit would acknowledge that our lot was distinctly preferable to that of the ordinary infantrymen as a

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general rule, it may well be doubted whether on the Hinges-Locon front the pioneer had not the more trying and dangerous time. As one officer, who had previous infantry experience in France, observed in his diary, " Up the line, what with the shelling and shocks that we did get, and the strain of expecting shelling everywhere at any time, it was very wearing to the nerves. Being all the time in the open, either wiring or digging, or walking up along roads that were always enfiladed, over bridges that were shelled regularly, and past cross-roads that continually received attention at all hours of the night, made our pioneer work very much less enviable than that of the troops holding the line, who could lie secure in a shallow trench most of the time."

The recompense was the knowledge of good work accomplished. The battalion's reputation stood at a very high level. For most of the time Colonel Martin dealt direct with the General Staff of the Division, without the intermediary of the C.R.E. New Engineer officers were actually sent to learn their R.E. work from the Pioneers, a remarkably eloquent tribute to the efficiency of the battalion. General Deverell was greatly pleased, and in a memorandum circulated to all units, he expatiated on the finely organised and executed work of the 20th and held it up as an example to the whole Division. " The work of the Battalion," he wrote, " is excellent and deserves the praise of all ranks of the Division. An inspection of their work will demonstrate the value of well-organised work carried out by officers and men working with

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a most praiseworthy thoroughness. The General Officer Commanding wishes his appreciation of their conduct and work, often under trying circumstances, conveyed to all ranks of the Battalion." When Colonel Martin received the D.S.O., as he shortly did, before the end of the year, it had been deserved for his battalion's accomplishment on the Hinges-Locon front alone.

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Chapter IX.

THE GREAT ADVANCE.

The battalion moved back to Burbure, which it did not find so attractive as on its previous visit, and so to Pressis-les-Pernes, where four days were spent. The most notable events were the Corps Horse Show, and a visit from the Army Commander, General Birdwood. Latterly, during our long period on the Béthune front, the Army commands in the north had been closed up. The reconstituted Fifth Army had come in between the First and Second, and had taken over the east and south-east sides of the Lys Salient. Now the hero of Anzac paid the unit a flying visit. On August 13th the battalion moved right away into an entirely different part of the world, proceeding by rail to Grouches, near Doullens, where it had been before. Training was carried on for a week, and there were also successful battalion sports, including an officers' mile race. The next move on August 20th brought the 20th into the neighbourhood of the battlefield once more. Thence onward till the Armistice on November 11th, it was to play its part in the great continuous final advance which broke the German armies in the west and gave victory to the Allied cause.

The rôle of the Pioneers in this genuine advance was quite different from that which it had had to fulfil in offensives hitherto. There were bad days

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in store; yet the battalion's worst experiences were, as a whole, really over when it left the Hinges-Locon front. Its anxieties were to be less heavy, its losses light. It had always been recognised that in the event of a real break-through this would be so. It was slowness of movement or stability that brought its ordeals to a pioneer unit. With swift movement the task of the Pioneers became almost entirely that of maintaining communications, *i.e.*, road work. In previous "pushes" much of the battalion's activities had been in front of the infantry; in the final "push" this never happened. There was no need for elaborate consolidation—what was needed in that way could be done by the infantry—because each newly-won position was but a very temporary stepping-stone to the next. But the repair and maintenance of the roads was absolutely essential in order to secure the momentum of continuous advance. The earlier stages of the fighting were over the devastated areas where the roads had been cut up by movement and counter-movement during years of war. Once past Cambrai it was a different matter. There the roads had not undergone such harsh usage; but they had all been used by the Germans and had seen much heavy wear, while the forward movement of the vast quantities of heavy traffic of the oncoming British forces would have meant a very severe strain on even the strongest of roadways.

As with the great advance of the Fourth Army on August 8th, which had opened these new British operations, so now on the front of the Third Army the most elaborate means were taken to secure

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surprise. A minimum of traffic was visible on the roads, and the troops took up their assembly positions under cover of the night. Thus the battalion left Grouches at 10.30 p.m. on the 19th, and after a most uncomfortable march in pitch darkness over horrible roads, constantly checked owing to heavy lorry traffic, arrived at Bienvillers at 5 a.m. next morning. All that day the men had to keep still, concealed as far as possible. Next morning at 4.55 the 2nd and Guards Divisions of the 11th Corps opened the assault, the Third Division afterwards passing through them and gaining the line of the Arras-Achiet-le-Petit railway. The same night the battalion moved out to its task, which consisted of working on infantry tracks and mule tracks in the desolate forward area. This they continued the next day, after which they shifted their quarters from Bienvillers to trenches at Courcelles-le-Comte, just west of the railway line, and a few miles north of Achiet-le-Grand. Immediately on arrival all A. Company's cooks were killed by a single shell. Work was now done on the Courcelles—Ervillers road, but almost immediately the battalion moved forward again into the Purple Line, where it rested for two days. Accommodation these days in open trenches without dugouts was very cold and comfortless. Work recommenced on the 27th on the road Ayette—Moyeneville. Next day the road between Hamelincourt and Ervillers had to be repaired, and after that the Ervillers—St. Leger—Croisilles road. The battalion was now in very familiar surroundings, as they were those of the previous winter and spring, and the scenes became still more familiar

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when the men found themselves back again upon the Ecoust—Mory and Ecoust—Noreuil—Lagnicourt roads. Already the Third Army's August battle, to which the Commander-in-Chief gave the title of the battle of Bapaume, had wiped out every vestige of the March retreat. This had all been accomplished in nine days' fighting. The 3rd Division's infantry had been actively engaged the whole time, taking Gommecourt on the 23rd and having rather a hard tussle in Ecoust later. Now it was withdrawn and the battalion returned to Bienvillers on September 6th for a rest.

Throughout the continuous offensive, which only terminated on the Armistice, in which the entire British Army was engaged, and in which the Third and Fourth Armies were involved in constant heavy fighting, the admirable system was maintained of having four divisions per Corps, two occupied in active operations or line holding, the other two resting. The VIth Corps in the Great Advance consisted of the 2nd, 3rd and 62nd and Guards Divisions. Thus each Division got time for reinforcement and a certain amount of training and relaxation in these strenuous days. Needless to say, the Pioneers did not get all the rest the infantry got. On this occasion, for example, their rest with the other units of the Division lasted three days only, training being much hampered by deplorable weather; and on September 9th they received orders from the C.E. of the Corps to move forward again. They left the following morning, having a very hard, difficult march, owing to the heavy downpour of rain and the consequent bad condition

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of the road, and arrived at Courcelles-le-Comte at 5 p.m. Next day they continued their march to camping ground a little east of Beugny. They were now revisiting the scenes of the summer of 1917. They were in the neighbourhood of the Hindenburg line, and the town dominating the whole district was Cambrai, whose capture would be the object of the next phase in the operations. The Canal du Nord successfully crossed, the Hindenburg line breached, and the great railway junction of Cambrai taken from the enemy, and the strongest of his remaining defences in France would have been broken. The next phase in the attack was, then, likely to be the most critical, and, if successful, the most decisive of all. There would never be stronger opposition than the Germans had the opportunity of showing here.

The great assault on the Hindenburg line, in which both Third and Fourth Armies were to co-operate, entailed considerable preparation. Accordingly, at this stage, there was a distinct pause, and as he had the powerful defences of the Hindenburg system to support him, the enemy became distinctly nasty and even aggressive. In these circumstances one of the jobs the Pioneers were set to do was none of the pleasantest, and on one occasion in particular it was exceedingly objectionable. The main undertaking on which A. and B. Companies were concentrated was good enough,—the improvement of the Beaumetz—Doignies and Doignies—Hermies roads. Doignies was sometimes shelled, and Hermies was pretty far forward even after the capture of Havrincourt by the 62nd Division on September 12th.

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On September 18th the road work was extended through Hermies to the Canal Bank. This was not an agreeable locality, the slopes south and east of the village providing battery positions which the enemy detacted and trounced severely. Since the 14th C. Company, acting with a Railway Construction Company, had been working on what was distinctly the least agreeable task as yet allotted to the battalion in this sector, and also distinctly the most important and the most interesting. The Canal du Nord in the Hermies-Havrincourt neighbourhood ran between high cuttings and was completely dry. There were no bridges carrying roads across it, therefore the dry bottom of the Canal became a thoroughfare. If the advance was to be successful and to continue this bed of the Canal must become a very big thoroughfare indeed; it must carry the transport of the whole Corps. In order to enable heavy vehicles to descend from the Canal Bank into the bed of the Canal a ramp had to be constructed. Upon the building and securing of that ramp the ability of the VIth Corps to profit by the success of its infantry and to press forward very intimately depended. There used to be many hundreds of men moving about and working either on the Canal side or in the Canal itself during these days of preparation, and seeing that German observation balloons looked directly down into this hive of activity the marvel really is that the enemy did not do a lot more damage than he did. He did plenty one day, at any rate, the day on which he attacked Moeuvres, north of the Bapaume-Cambrai road, the vital position for the projected attack to

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be made by the XVIIth Corps. A tremendous barrage of H.E. and gas was put down on the whole Havrincourt forward neighbourhood on the afternoon in question. While this outburst of fury disturbed everybody in the battalion, its full force was felt especially by the C. Company contingent under Sec.-Lieut. Robertson. The shells bursting upon the hard surface of the Canal bottom had terrible spreading effect, and neither inside the Canal nor on the bank was there the slighest protection, so that casualties were wholly unavoidable.

B. Company also built an important ramp, leading up to a new bridge which the engineers threw over the Canal a good way further up, where the Canal ran north and south instead of east and west, as it did south of Hermies; and thus they, as well as C. Company, made a notable contribution to the vital task of creating the indispensable lines of communication. Finally must be mentioned another road-making job in the neighbourhood of the so-called Yorkshire Bank on the southern side of the Canal just at the apex formed by its change of direction. Yorkshire Bank itself was a large spoil heap of chalk, and it was a very obnoxious spot. Whatever points in the vicinity the enemy might ignore he made a point of attending to this one.

Possibly the most remarkable episode of the period of waiting prior to the battle of the Hindenburg line occurred on the night of September 16th, when, with astonishing suddenness, there sprung up a storm of extraordinary violence. There was vivid lightning with heavy thunder, and the rain descended like a solid sheet, but the outstanding

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feature of the storm was the tropical fury of the wind. Rising to its full height in a minute or two, it blew a genuine hurricane. Tents for miles and miles around were blown down or caught up into heaven. The fury of man was strangely dwarfed by that of the elements; and, indeed, almost at once warfare ceased. The guns were silent. Friends and foes alike were solely occupied in saving themselves from being drowned or blown away; there was a truce to battle.

Having regard to the exceptional strength of the positions now to be assaulted, opinion in the battalion was not too sanguine as to the success of the next push. But when it came, as it did on September 27th, its results were splendid beyond all expectation. The attack prospered everywhere. As for the 3rd Division it captured not only Flesquières, but also the village of Ribécourt, and took 2,500 prisoners—an extraordinary haul for a single divisional front. The following day the battalion was employed on some of the captured territory on the Havrincourt—Flesquières and Flesquières—Ribécourt roads. On that day the Third Army's advance continued and Marcoing on the Canal de St. Quentin was seized. On the 29th various crossings of that Canal were secured and the village of Masnières was taken.

The battalion was now, like the rest of the Division, in quite new territory. The ground had indeed been in British hands at one time, as the result of the battle of Cambrai in November, 1917, but the great German counter-attacks at Bourlon and between Masnières and Vendhuile had won it

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back almost at once. Derelict tanks on the commanding Flesquières ridge were eloquent reminders of all that fighting nearly a year since. On the 30th the battalion took up its habitation in trenches near Flesquières, but the very next morning was moved into Ribécourt, sustaining losses from shell-fire directly on arrival at its new trenches. "A certain liveliness" prevailed in Ribécourt and its neighbourhood that day, for again a big battle was in progress and the 3rd Division was heavily in action, endeavouring to cut off Cambrai from the south. The hard nut to crack was the village of Rumilly, which had excellent natural advantages for defence, and was infested with machine-guns. After an obstinate struggle, in the course of which the village was gained, lost and won again, the Germans retired east of the Rumilly—Cambrai road, and after fighting, which continued throughout October 2nd into the morning of the 3rd, they had been forced back to a line a little in front of Niergnes and Seranvillers. But all through that period both the 3rd Division and the 2nd Division on the left were finding their advance strongly contested and further progress a matter of real difficulty. Opposition was distinctly stronger than it had been at Flesquières and Ribécourt; the Germans were not going to yield up Cambrai without putting up a good fight for it. In the circumstance, it seems to have been rather premature to order the battalion to send officers to reconnoitre the two Masnières-Cambrai roads, for the situation did not allow of any engineering work being done on either. Two officers with orderlies went forward, Lieut. Fearby

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and Sec.-Lieut. Young. They certainly both went further along towards Cambrai than can ever have been intended, but clearly also both in a very obscure situation were determined to carry out their reconnaisance thoroughly and not simply to consult the dictates of caution. It was by no means easy in the semi-open kind of fighting which had now been reached to recognise where the front line was or what constituted it. Often the troops actually holding it did not know themselves that they did so. It was thus on the present occasion. The two officers both got right beyond the British outpost line without realising it, and Lieut. Fearby and Rfn. Sanderson, his orderly, were severely wounded, while Sec. Lieut. Young and his orderly were taken prisoners. Fearby reconnoitred his road to within about 300 yards of the first houses in Cambrai, when he and Sanderson were spotted by Germans only a short distance ahead. They ran back under a hail of bullets. Fearby returned the fire with a rifle he was carrying, but as they had no cover they were soon both of them hit, Sanderson in the stomach, Fearby in the calf. They were both lucky in regaining the British lines alive.

The work of the battalion on October 2nd and 3rd was on the Marcoing-Cambrai and Marcoing—Masnières roads, exceedingly heavy shelling which considerably interfered with operations, being experienced on the 2nd, while on the 4th the Masnières—Rumilly road was cleared. Work on these three roads continued during the next three days. Conditions in the Masnières neighbourhood were none too good, as the village was apt to be badly shelled. On the

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8th the 3rd Division renewed its forward movement, its three objectives for the day being first the trench in front of Seranvillers held by the Germans, second the village of Seranvillers itself, third the village of Wambaix, north-east of Seranvillers, and a line of railway still further east. This ambitious programme, entrusted to the 9th Brigade with the assistance of the 76th Brigade, was not entirely realised, the third objective not being reached. During this day of battles the 20th were employed on a track running on the north side of and parallel with the Marcoing-Masnières road, and also in filling in the shell holes in the towing path on the east side of the St. Quentin Canal. The neighbourhood was not healthy that day, as the enemy during the early hours of the battle especially pounded the line of the Canal with fire from battery positions to the north.

After the battle, the infantry of the Division was drawn back into Corps reserve in the Hermies area. The Pioneers, on the other hand, went further forward and were quartered for over a week in the village of Crèvecoeur, east of Masnières. Whilst billeted here it was engaged upon the Crèvecoeur—Cambrai, Crèvecoeur—Rumilly and Crévecoeur—Seranvillers roads; also on mule and limber tracks further forward. In the meantime the advance on the VIth Corps front was being continued by the Guards and 62nd Divisions and the crossings of the Selle river had been secured, together with the town of Solesmes. On the 20th the battalion moved another stage forward to the large village of Quiévy, where enemy aeroplanes were a nuisance at night, and on the following morning it started work on the Quiévy-

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Solesmes road, which badly needed it, Solesmes being at this time only a very short distance behind the front line. This was continued on the two following days—the second (October 23rd) being another day of battle for the Division, which attacked at 3.20 a.m. Before noon the villages of Romeries and Vertain had been captured, and before night the Division was established miles further forward, having taken the villages of Escarmain and reached the line of the Ecaillon river. During the next four days, acting under conditions of open warfare with the assistance of cavalry, the Division pushed still further forward, taking the village of Ruesnes and seizing the line of the Valesciennes—Avesnes railway.

By 10.30 a.m. on the 24th the Pioneers had moved forward to Solesmes, and they at once started work on the Solesmes—Romeries road under a good deal of shell fire at first. The next day, following rapidly in the path of the advance, the battalion was engaged not only on this road, but also on the Romeries—Vertain road, and the Romeries—Beaudignies road. This work continued the two following days. On the 28th, while operations still continued on the Beaudignies road, A. Company was put on the Trousse Minon—Escarmain road and C. Company on to roads in the latter village, which was apt to receive a good deal of attention from hostile artillery. On this day the Transport Officer, Sec. Lieut. Brodribb, was severely wounded in his own transport lines. The last day of October found the battalion still occupied with this programme, which was continued during the first three days of November.

After its five days of continuous fighting the

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infantry of the Division had been withdrawn into Corps reserve. It was never called upon to fight again in the war. Had the Armistice terms not been accepted it would, on November 11th, have advanced with a special mobile force of cavalry and horse artillery as the advance guard of the Third Army into the blue in the pursuit of a rapidly fleeing, disintegrating German Army. But the joy of that adventure was denied General Deverell and his 3rd Division.

On October 4th, the day of the last big battle of the war, the battalion commenced work on the road leading from Ruesnes into one of Vauban's old fortresses, Le Quesnoy; the battalion was far forward, the position in front was unknown, and there was heavy shelling and machine-gun fire. On the 6th quarters were shifted forward from Solesmes to Ruesnes, and the men were employed on the Le Quesnoy—Bavai road. This region had a peculiar interest attaching to it. The little town of Bavai was a remarkable road junction, and just here in the first stage of the retreat from Mons in 1914 had been the point of junction between the 1st and 2nd Corps of the original Expeditionary Force when Sir John French was engaged in evading Kluck's strategy of forcing him against the fortress of Maubeuge and was falling back to the Forêt de Mormal. Indeed, since Solesmes the 3rd Division had been retracing the steps it had taken in that great retreat. It was poetically fitting that the last few days of the war should have brought it back to those already historic scenes. It was on these roads that the Pioneers of the 3rd Division accomplished their last pioneering

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work of the war. While they were at Ruesnes came the report that an Armistice was speedily approaching; but so often had rumour proved a lying jade, whenever her news was good, that it was not only the "doubting Thomases" that refused to believe. To those in the battalion who had been campaigning ever since its arrival in France, to some who had been out in the still earlier days of 1914–1915, the war had come to seem part of the permanent order of nature for ever more, so that it was very difficult to realise all at once, to take in all that it meant, when at the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month of 1918 there came the "cease fire." There were some jollifications certainly that night, but the extraordinarily striking thing about the reception of the great news among the troops in France was their strange quietude. Riotous rejoicings there may have been in plenty in England; the fighting men in France did not indulge in them. Army routine went on as usual. The Pioneers went on mending the Le Quesnoy—Bavai road on November 11th as they had done the day before. They went on with the same task on the 12th also; but ere that there had come the news that such work would shortly cease, for the 3rd Division was one of those selected to form part of the Army of Occupation in Germany.

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Chapter X.

INTO GERMANY.

In the early days of the battalion's career in France—before the battle of the Somme—some of the men had been fond of singing a song, the theme of which was the reception the K.R.R.'s would receive from the Kaiser when they got to Berlin, and what they would do when they got there. Of those old stalwarts but few remained on Armistice Day, but there still were some of the original 20th, and it was the right and fitting finish that these should now have the satisfaction of marching, not, indeed, to Berlin, but at least as far as the Rhine. It was a triumphant conclusion of the war, which the troops privileged to make that advance into Germany would always in after days look back to with satisfaction. But at the time it was unfortunately not always the triumphal character of the expedition that was most in evidence. The difficulties of the march were a clear indication of the serious—although, of course, far from insoluble—problems the staff would have been confronted with had hostilities been continued. By the time the British advance reached the line of Maubeuge and Mons it had got out of touch with its railheads. The Germans had systematically destroyed the railways in the retreat and in the country over which the advance of the Third and Fourth Armies had taken place

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there was practically no railway system in operation. Supplies had consequently to be brought up long distances by motor transport. For the first and only time since 1914 the supply services of the British Army in France had a strain put upon them rather greater than they could bear. Rations were not always brought up with their previous automatic regularity and abundance. All through the fighting days the British soldiers had had the needs of the inner man well provided for; they found, now that the fighting was over, that they were not so well cared for. The British Army, notoriously, has always been accustomed to fight, and also to march, "on its stomach," and that there should have been some grousing when certain harships had to be put up with after the Armistice, which had not existed before it, is not surprising. To have to start off on a long day's march on practically an empty stomach is a very real hardship. As a matter of fact, in respect to rations, the British forces were much better provided for than the French during the march. Worse really than the trouble about rations was the inability to cope with the tremendous strain upon shoe-leather consequent upon weeks of continuous marching. Not only boots, but socks inevitably became worn out, and only to a very inadequate extent could they be replaced. Some of the men were, in these circumstances, reduced to marching practically on their naked feet. When it is remembered, in addition to these troubles, that much of the country traversed both in Belgium and in Germany was very thinly populated, and, therefore, afforded poor billeting facilities, and that much of

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the road was extremely hilly and in a very poor condition, especially in bad weather, so that going was very hard, it will be realised that the march to the Rhine made a very great demand on the men's endurance. All honour to them, then, that they went along gamely, steadily, cheerily, maintaining a high standard of march discipline throughout.

The initial stages, in France, were pretty easy. On November 15th the battalion moved from Ruesnes to Gommegnies. The march into Germany may be said to have commenced from there, on the 16th, when the destination was the small village of Neuf Mesnil. The next day the battalion shifted a very short distance to Louvroil, a large industrial suburb of Maubeuge, where General Deverell, who was making a round of all units of the Division, paid a visit to the 20th K.R.R.C. and spoke to them on their past record and on the work of the period now opening. On the 20th the march was continued to the village of Cousolre, just outside the French frontier. Here three days were spent on two of which the battalion was employed on road work in the neighbourhood, while on Sunday, the 23rd, a special thanksgiving service for the Armistice was held. Next day the battalion marched—on empty stomachs—to the very picturesque little town of Thuin, situated high above the river Sambre. It was a charming place when you once got into it, but it was perched on the top of an exceedingly steep hill, which made a very nasty finish to a long march. The marches for the next two days were almost entirely on second-class roads, all the main highways in this part of the world running northwards into

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the highly industrialised centre of Charleroi and its environs, not eastwards in the direction we had to go. It was essentially a cross-country journey, therefore, to Nalinnes on the 25th and thence in wet weather to Biesme on the 26th. The next march was a long one, again in wet weather, up to Rouillon on the banks of the Meuse in that beautiful part of the river which flows between Namur and Dinant.

The crossing of the Meuse brought the battalion into the country represented on the March Sheet among the excellent series of military maps used by the forces in France. The largest place on it is Ciney, with a population of 5,000, and Marche itself has only 3,500. Most of the villages have only a few hundred inhabitants. It is the region of the northern Ardennes, a land of undulating uplands, generally about 1,000 feet above sea-level, and reaching 2,000. It is at all times picturesque country, and sometimes really fine and inspiring; but, from the point of view of marching it has its drawbacks. The first day's journey across the Meuse to Natoye was a very hard one, over roads both heavy and hilly, the weather being icy cold. The next stage to the small village of Pessoux was easier and much shorter. Here a halt was made for three days, owing to the failure of the Divisional A.S.C. This was a very welcome rest, except that the only provender was bully and biscuits. On December 4th the march was continued to Baillonville; on the 5th to Melreux—quite a short distance through very pretty country; on the 6th to Mormont, where the billets were very bad indeed. A short

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march of a little over three hours on the 7th brought the battalion to the small, ugly and filthy village of Malempré; a rather longer one next day over fine country to a cluster of minute hamlets—Sart, where A. Company were accommodated—Joubieval, where B. went, and Comte, where C. put up. The accommodation was so extremely restricted that it was with the utmost difficulty that billets were found for all the men. Next day a short march of under three hours brought the battalion to much better billets in the village of Bovigny, lying in the angle formed by the boundaries of Belgium, Luxemburg and Germany.

On December 11th, after a day's rest, the battalion moved off again, and at 10.30 crossed the German frontier, the bugles playing the regimental march and the Corps Commander taking the salute. Inside the German frontier the roads were in an appalling condition, deep in abominable mire, and giving the impression that they had been utterly neglected for years. The little hamlets, which provided the only billets, were miserably squalid. The country was the bleakest upland, being the northern fringe of that barren hill region known as the Eifel, which stretches eastwards towards Coblenz. This country is usually deep in snow by the beginning of December, so that the troops were lucky not to have to pass through it in blizzards, but the weather was very wet and miserable enough. The Commanding Officer's comments on the journeys of the 12th to 15th are "very heavy marching—very big hills—very wet—raining hard—a long march." He observes of the 13th that the men stood the long march

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well, but on the 15th they were "very tired." So through Heuem, Halschlag, Schmidtheim, Schonau and Kirspenich, the different stopping-places, the battalion came on the 17th to Euskirchen, a finely-built, wealthy little modern town, where the billets were excellent. Next day, which was very cold, the march was to Fussenich, and on the 19th the final destination was reached, in the extremely prosperous Rhineland town of Düren, where the battalion was accommodated in a block of the barracks. The 20th K.R.R.C. were established as a unit in the Rhine Army of Occupation.

For the march into Germany, the battalion had been attached to the 76th Infantry Brigade, the leading brigade of the 3rd Division under the command of Brig.-Gen. F. E. Metcalfe, C.B., C.M.G., D.S.O. General Metcalfe had nothing but praise for the splendid way in which the battalion endured the many hardships of that long five weeks' march over very bad roads which were often covered with snow. On several occasions he gave the battalion the honour of leading the Brigade, and at the conclusion of the march he expressed the wish that the 20th battalion should be attached permanently to the 76th Brigade during their stay in Germany. This, unfortunately, was not possible, but when it is taken into consideration that the brigade at that time comprised three such fine units as: First Battalion The Gordon Highlanders, Second Battalion The Suffolk Regiment, and the Eighth Battalion The King's Liverpool Regiment, the suggestion was a great compliment to all ranks of the battalion.

There is no need to say much of the remainder

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of the battalion's history, which lasted between three and four months. They were not strenuous days. Very rightly it was not intended that they should be. In the mornings there was ordinary infantry training; in the afternoons football and sports of different kinds. There were whist drives and other entertainments in the evening. Classes were conducted under the superintendence of Sec. Lieut. Mackin, in accordance with the newly instituted army education scheme. The battalion had already provided the 3rd Division with its Divisional Education Officer, responsible for the organisation of the system.

Naturally return to civilian life was, during these months, uppermost in everyone's mind. At least one serious blunder was made in Whitehall with regard to demobilisation, whereby much legitimate dissatisfaction was created. But in the 20th the gradual progress of demobilisation ran very smoothly, and the battalion was specially complimented by General Deverell in the conspicuous absence of trouble in it from this usually troublesome source. There was only one episode during this period that calls for special mention. Disturbances were feared in consequence of a strike at Weisweiler, and a detachment of the 20th were deputed to keep order there, and in particular to guard the electric power station. The party consisted of 6 officers and over 200 men under the command of Major Coker, D.S.O., who, having seen service under General Smuts in East Africa, had been a very popular second-in-command of the 20th ever since Chocques days.

The detachment set out for Weisweiler on

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February 25th. The previous day General Deverell had paid a farewell visit and made a parting speech to the battalion. Owing to a re-organisation of the Army of the Rhine, the 20th K.R.R.C. was transferred from the 3rd to the 2nd Division, which became specifically a light infantry division. A more drastic step in the reconstitution of the forces in Germany came in the middle of the month when the headquarters of the regular divisions re-opened in England at Aldershot, etc., and when what had been the 1st, 2nd, 3rd Divisions, etc., in Germany became the Midland, Southern, Northern, etc. By this time the composition of the formations in Germany had almost completely changed. The bulk of those who had crossed the frontier only a few months before had been demobilised; only a few officers and men remained on special terms of service. Young troops, most of them very youthful indeed, had been drafted out to take their places. Finally, to take charge of the units composed of these young soldiers, there came regular officers who had generally been commanding brigades just before. When Colonel Martin on April 2nd relinquished the command of the battalion to Colonel Willans, the last link in its identity was gone; the 20th King's Royal Rifle Corps may be said to have ceased to exist.

Yet in a truer sense it had not come to an end. Like all the many other service battalions raised specifically for the purpose of the war, it had done its work and must pass out of the Army List. But the record of such units does not die; the history of the British Army is immeasurably the richer for

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their achievements. The 20th is kept alive to-day by the excellent institution of the annual dinner of the old officers, organised by the energy of Lieut. Hastings Strange and his associates of the Officers' Committee. It is felt to be alive whenever one old 20th man pursuing his ordinary civilian duties has the good luck to meet another. Temporary soldiers had the same dislike that the regular Tommy had for pretentious language. Yet the high-sounding phrase, Comradeship in Arms, is felt by the old 20th men to be a very genuine and very fine reality which binds them very closely together by the link of lasting friendship formed in campaigning days, strengthened and cemented by the stress of dangers faced together and the profound mutual respect and mutual trust which only such experiences can produce in their utmost measure. Still more is it true that the battalion lives in all its members' memories of what they went through together and accomplished together. But the memory of the individual is only as long as his own lifetime. It is fitting that the battalion should have a longer life, a more permanent memorial than such fleeting remembrance. That is why this short history has been written.

To write that history fully would take a large volume. There would have to be recorded in it heaps and heaps of everyday incidents, passed over in these pages, incidents both tragic and humorous. Only a collection of hundreds of personal reminiscences could adequately represent these. Still more, there would have to be recorded the names of far more individuals than have been

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mentioned here of officers, warrant officers, non-commissioned officers and men. But even so it would be an invidious task—selection would be impossible, there were so many fine leaders, sterling workers, cheery good fellows.

It must suffice to sum up the characteristics and the accomplishment of the battalion in a few final words. Its human material was excellent. There were inevitably weak spots, as in any other unit, but the standard was high. Officers and men co-operated splendidly. Throughout, the warrant officers and N.C.O.'s were a great tower of strength. Few units can have been stronger in this respect. The formal discipline of the battalion was a little rough to begin with, but it vastly improved and became extremely good, as the admirable march discipline, achieved after a little, clearly demonstrated. But the essentials of good discipline—which is at bottom a matter of self-respect, good feeling, confidence between officers and men—they always existed, and there was practically no "crime" in the battalion at all.

The work was of a most arduous character, and demanded a heavy physical effort and much endurance. It is a hard life to have to march night after night over foul, heavy roads or tracks for five or six miles, heavily laden with bulky implements and materials for much of the way, after that to put in some six or eight, or even on occasion some twelve, continuous hours of strenuous muscular labour, and then march back those five or six miles again. When it is remembered that the work was most often done in darkness, frequently in torrents

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of rain, deep in mud or slush, in the midst of shells and bullets and with the chance of death an ever present factor, it will be realised that the strain on the nerves was even greater than the physical strain. This was particularly the case with officers and N.C.O.'s who had the responsibility of carrying through the work, often when plans unavoidably miscarried owing to enemy action and conditions seemed to render success impossible. The work may have been only the digging of a ditch or the erection of a wire fence—inglorious enough it sounds —but it cost much in thought and resolution and effort, and often in human life to do such work, and, however notable and distinguished old 20th men may become in their civilian occupation in the future, they will never accomplish anything of which they have better right to be proud than those pioneering jobs they saw carried through in France. Many good men died, many more were wounded, injured or broken, by the work the 20th K.R.R.C. were called upon to perform. Less showy, less well advertised than that of some other arm in the services, it was not less dangerous or responsible or necessary than theirs. Indeed it was the essential work—that of defending, strengthening and advancing that British Line which protected our shores and kept our homes inviolate.

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